

Belonging Sustains Life
John 15:1-8, Isaiah 5:1-7

Friends, the purpose of our sermon series this month is to help us listen for what Christ wants to say to us about how we can grow closer to Him – **by growing closer to His body**... and specifically considering what that might mean for each of us in terms of taking some “next steps” in our relationship with Valleyview.

And I’m pleased to say that I can see evidence that we’re listening... last week’s message was confirmation for a number of you who have previously approached me about wanting to be baptized, and to have your kids baptized and the message was confirmation that we need to get working on that and so we’re setting up meetings to prepare for that to happen in the near future – praise God!

And I’m praying that as we continue with the remaining messages, more and more of us will hear Christ encouraging us to take that next step to grow closer with His Body at Valleyview - through making this your home church, by prioritizing worship attendance, becoming professing members, or considering

making a commitment to participating in or leading a ministry and so on...

Because as we said last week, if you truly desire to grow closer to Jesus - at some point you have to face the fact that it means being intentional about growing closer to His church – and....

if we are serious about being a Community Church whose mission is to reach out to the community – then at some point we all have to start being very intentional about being a community which is the Body of Christ.

Martin Luther once said, *"Anyone who is to find Christ must first find the church. How could anyone know where Christ is and what faith is in him unless he knew where his believers are?"*

So friends – our next steps in our relationship with Valleyview are critical for us - both in terms of our relationship with Christ and our contribution to the mission He’s given us here in Springbank Hill.

So this morning we are looking at John 15:1-8, but instead of applying this passage to our individual relationship with Jesus – as is typically done - we want to consider it in light of our relationship with the Church.

Now in order for us to consider it in this way – we need to hear these words of Jesus being spoken – not first and foremost to us – but to his Jewish disciples, and with the indictments of Israel’s unfruitfulness in Isaiah 5 as the backdrop.

Jesus is not the first to use the analogy of a vineyard to address God’s people and communicate something to them...

In Isaiah 5 the prophet uses the imagery of the vineyard to deliver a scathing rebuke to Israel for their failure to produce “the fruit” of justice and righteousness.

The owner of the vineyard had gone to great lengths to make the vineyard fruitful, but in spite of all his efforts the vineyard would not bear fruit.

Meaning; that in spite of receiving grace and mercy from God and being shown what was good and right in His Law; Israel did not produce fruit in keeping with what God had done for them.

And as people are fond of saying these days... “The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again but expecting different results.”

God asks the question “*What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it?*” It’s a rhetorical question...

From the agricultural point of view of this analogy, all the right things that would normally cause a vineyard to flourish and produce have been done for it – there is nothing more one could do.

The owner picked a good location with good soil, He cleared away the rocks and dug up the earth to make it easy to grow in, He planted what was supposed to be a good variety of grape-vine.

He built a wall around it to keep out the animals who like to eat the vines and would wreck the vineyard. He built a watch-tower to make it easy to watch over the vineyard and protect it from whatever might threaten it.

He put all this energy and effort into the vineyard but the vineyard doesn't produce fruit – what is there left to do - except walk away and let it go to ruin.

And if you remember back to our breakfast theatre presentation of the story of Daniel in November, we learned that the Babylonian conquest of Judah and the exile of 597BC and the subsequent destruction of the temple in 587BC were the promised consequences for Israel's covenant unfaithfulness.

That was God letting his vineyard go to ruin... what more could He have done for it?

Well friends the good news is that God is greater than an actual vineyard owner; because while an actual vineyard owner wouldn't be able to do anything more to make an unfruitful

vineyard produce fruit; God is the God of the impossible (Mark 10:27) and He actually can make an unfruitful vineyard capable of producing fruit and He had a plan to make an unfruitful people fruitful.

God can do this and He will do this for His covenant people in spite of their unfaithfulness. So a few chapters later in Isaiah 27:2-3, 6 we discover this promise:

"In that day - Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the Lord, watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it. I am not angry. If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire. Or else let them come to me for refuge; let them make peace with me. Yes, let them make peace with me. In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit."

Isn't that an amazing promise!? That one day God's covenant people will bear fruit – they will produce a just society, their actions will be characterized by loyalty to the One true God, they

will only worship the One true God – no more idolatry... and this will impact the entire world!

With God all things are possible!

And so, for many many years God's people had been looking forward to the nation of Israel becoming a fruitful vineyard once again.

Now – with all of this background information in mind listen to Jesus words anew.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener"

Friends – this gives us a new perspective on what Jesus is speaking about here doesn't it?

This isn't just a nice little lesson where Jesus is giving his disciples some tips on how they can increase their personal productivity or effectiveness in ministry and life.

Instead Jesus is reaching back to the prophet Isaiah and proclaiming that He is that Vine which chapter 27 promised would take root and bud and blossom and fill the world with fruit!

He is the true Vine – the true Israelite – the true Israel! That's an incredible claim!

When the Word of God became flesh and was born of the Virgin Mary –that was the true vine taking root...

And when Jesus was baptized by John he repented on behalf of all Israel for their unfruitfulness and then the Father sent the Holy Spirit upon Jesus and He began his ministry – that was when the true vine began to bud, and blossom...

and when Jesus began to teach people and proclaim the Kingdom of Heaven was near and they began to follow Him and listen to his teaching – that was the vine beginning to bear fruit!

And when Jesus called his 12 twelve disciples and told them to follow Him – that was the beginning of a new Israel that would eventually fill the world with the fruit that comes from the True Vine.

But in order for this to happen – Jesus’ disciples needed to understand who He was as the True Vine and that since they were his followers they needed to see themselves as His branches.

If they followed Jesus and listened to his words, obeyed his teachings, and believed in what He said and did and who He claimed to be – if his words remained in them.... Then their lives, like branches connected to a vine, would produce fruit.

What kind of fruit? Well this is where the background from Isaiah is helpful again, what kind of fruit was God looking for in Isaiah 5? The fruit of justice and righteousness...

But this opportunity and ability to produce fruit as a renewed people of Israel was only available through Jesus, which is why

He says *“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”*

It would be impossible for the disciples or any of the Jews to produce the kind of justice and righteousness that God was looking for in any other way; it wasn’t possible through the Law of Moses, it wasn’t possible through temple worship, sacrifices or prayers.

In fact it wasn’t possible through any human effort or endeavor because of how we are affected by sin.

Only Christ had the divine life in Him that the disciples and the Jews needed in order to become the Israel they were always supposed to be and fill the world with justice and righteousness.

So how does this apply to us? And what is Christ saying to us about our relationship with His Body?

Well typically we would apply this to ourselves in a very straightforward fashion – Jesus is saying this to his disciples, we’re also his disciples and therefore it applies to us.

And in one sense that is true – but I think applying like this allows us to skip over the fact that in the statement *“I am the true vine and my father is the gardener”* Jesus is primarily speaking about how He personally and physically embodies the entire race of Israel...

and the fact that in Himself He is the true nation of Israel, and thus anyone who is a Jew can only become a true Jew through Him.

So there are two implications that come out of this.

First, although it is Jesus who is the vine – the metaphor of the vine has a history of being understood as the people of God – the nation of Israel.

The purpose in Jesus applying the metaphor of the vine to himself is to help him teach His disciples about how He is re-creating a new people of God. (That’s why 12 disciples to renew 12 tribes)

So when Jesus is speaking to his disciples about remaining in the vine there is an aspect of this that speaks to remaining with the new people of God that Jesus is creating – His Body... The Church... and there is exhortation to not go back to what had constituted the people of God in the past.

This would be a very real temptation for the disciples – Paul had to rebuke Peter for giving into this temptation once when Peter started to eat separately from the Gentile believers in the city of Antioch when some Jewish believers came to visit. (Gal 2:11)

Peter was falling back on those old divisions from the old covenant that was now obsolete. He was not “remaining in Christ” and he certainly wasn’t “remaining in Christ’s Body” - in fact he was dividing Christ’s Body and Paul called him out on it and Peter repented.

And it's this unification of Jews and Gentiles in the new people of God – the Body of Christ is the second implication that comes out of Jesus' claim to be the vine.

I think Paul articulates it very clearly in his letter to the Ephesians *“this mystery is that through the gospel, the Gentiles are heirs together with Israel, members together of one body, and sharers together in the promise in Christ Jesus”* (Eph 3:6)

But this development had been hinted at back in Isaiah 27 as well.

After God speaks about how He will renew the vineyard and water it and guard it etc... In verse 4 we find this rather strange statement

“If only there were briars and thorns confronting me! I would march against them in battle; I would set them all on fire. Or else let them come to me for refuge; let them make peace with me. Yes, let them make peace with me.”

Friends as I understand this, it has to do with God's relationship to the Gentile nations.

God is no longer angry with Israel – because He's renewed it, but the surrounding nations need to be dealt with now.

While Israel was held responsible for her covenant unfaithfulness – the surrounding nations were guilty in part for seducing her away from God, and also guilty of attacking and oppressing her.

Much in the way briars and thorns would be problematic for a vineyard, because they spread... they are constantly sending out runners and shoots and invading the edges of the vineyard, growing up among the vines...

Or you perhaps there's a possibility of cross-pollination, where the vines get pollinated by the briars and thorns and somehow that changes the vine and what kind of fruit it produces...

So as I read this passage in Isaiah I see God first promising to restore the vineyard, Israel, and then He needs to deal with the

surrounding nations – and its almost like His first impulse is destroy them lest they bother his Vineyard again.

“I would march against them in battle, and set them all on fire”

But then it’s like God considers a second option,

“Or let them come to me for refuge, let them make peace with me...” Hmmmm – yes, that could work to.

And once God has considered this He settles on it as His preferred outcome. “Yes, let them make peace with me” (vs. 5)

And with this outcome in mind, God then declares that *“Israel will bud and blossom and fill the world with fruit”*

Not just because the vineyard is now extremely productive but also because the briars and thorns are at peace with God – in other words salvation has come to the Gentiles as well.

Gentiles can also become part of the true Israel in Jesus Christ.

And to stick with the agricultural metaphor Paul speaks of how this happens for us Gentiles in Romans 11:17. He says *“you – though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root...”*

Friends, do you know what grafting is? It’s when you take a branch that has been broken off of one plant, and you make a cut on the stem of another plant and you stick it in, and bind it up and over time it grows into that plant and becomes part of it.

Friends – the good news is that we have been grafted in to the true vine – we also in the process of becoming the true Israel because we have been grafted into Christ.

And now... we have finally arrived at the place where we need to consider what Christ is saying to us in all this about our relationship with His Body – with His Church here at Valleyview.

Now that we have wound our way through a whole bunch of scriptures and teachings – just like a vine twisting and turning around a trellis.

And with our deeper understanding of what is being said here and how Jesus is connected to a new Israel – a new people of God – now we are ready to let this bear the fruit of revealing our next step in our relationship to the new Israel – the Church at Valleyview.

So keep that image of being grafted into the vine front and center... and remember that Jesus said *“wherever two or three gather together in my name – I am there with them”* (Matt 18:20)

...and think about your relationship, your connection, your involvement, your commitment to your Church... because it is intimately connected to your relationship with Christ.

And now consider this question: are you working with the Gardener who is trying to graft you in or are you working against His efforts?

When a branch is grafted into a vine it needs to stay put if it is to grow in. It won't grow-in if it is only inserted into the vine on

occasion, or it is constantly being removed and then re-inserted... and it certainly won't bear fruit...

All that will happen is that the branch won't die as quickly as it might if it was just left on the ground...

Friends we need to honestly evaluate our relationship and determine if we are branches who keep pulling ourselves out of the vine.

That may take any number of forms – from the most obvious where we pull back from church and we start to show up less and less for worship, and we are less and less involved in ministries or Christ Care groups and so on... until our spiritual life dries up and we die away.

Or we may stay involved on a regular basis of some sort - but only at arms length. We won't commit ourselves fully to the whole truth of Christ and the scripture... or we won't completely embrace the mission of the church, or we won't allow any of our fellow Christians to develop a deeper friendship with us... and so on...

Now maybe we are branches who don't fight the Gardener grafting us into the vine.

We might be very involved in church – we are plugged in to everything! If the minister put out a call for extra helpers to deal with clogged toilets we'd sign right up! But even this can be a way of working against the Gardener friends.

Because somehow in all this activity we're just staying busy but we're not bearing fruit.

Maybe we just like being busy or maybe we don't know how... but for whatever reason we avoid engaging with the real reason the church does all this activity. We're like a branch that's just sprouting shoots off in every direction but there's no fruit.

So friends – consider the question “are you working with or against the Gardener as He is trying to graft you – to grow you into the Body of Christ here at Valleyview?”

Friends you can't have Christ without his Body and you can't have the Body without Jesus Christ...

The words are clear *“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.”*

The good news friends is that with the help of the Holy Spirit, many of us are in the process of growing in here at Valleyview... the graft is slowly taking hold, the branch is budding, blossoming and fruit is on its way.

So what is Jesus saying to you about your next step with Valleyview through all this today friends?

Do you need to take the next step of identifying the fruit that is growing in your life to see where this grace-gift will determine how and where you should serve the Church?

Some of those next steps are trying out some ministries opportunities, getting feedback from leadership on your effectiveness to see if it's the right fit, taking a gift test, or learning things that will grow your gifts and make you more effective and so on...

Do you need to do some pruning? Gardeners will often make what looks to be drastic cuts to enthusiastic but unfocused growth so that they can make the branch bear fruit – what needs to be cut out of your life so that you can focus on bearing fruit in the Body.

Or maybe the next step for you is to stop pulling ourselves in and out of the vine... make a decision to be more intentional about participating in worship, put yourself out there and develop relationships, friendships in the church, be a part of a Christ Care group – have someone over to your house for coffee, lunch, or set your kids up for a play-date with some kids from the church...

Or perhaps your next step is as simple as accepting that this is the church family which Christ has given you and its time to let yourself become one of us... you're not losing your individuality – you will be enriching the rest of us with who God has made you to be!

Friends what does your next step in your relationship with Valleyview need to be? How does Jesus want you to grow closer to him by growing closer to His body...?

For your sake – and for the sake of those who have yet to be grafted in... because friends; belonging sustains life!

Amen.