

Remain in Me!
John 15:1-8, Isaiah 5:1-7

Brothers and sisters, last Sunday the Lord's encouraging words to us focused on how Phil 1:6, and 4:13 empower us to endure and persevere through whatever hardship and adversity we may be facing. *"We are confident of this -that He who began a good work in us will see it through to completion"* and *"You can do all these things through him who gives you strength!"* And one of the ways that we receive that strength from Christ was through "getting into the Body" the church of Jesus.

So, I wanted to "get into" that a little bit more this morning so the Lord can encourage us on this matter and strengthen us for whatever it may be that we are facing.

It may be that the Lord is calling you to settle down with a home church, nudging you to prioritize worship attendance, look at becoming an official member, or leading to commitment to ministry here at Valleyview – but... what you are going through in your day-to-day life keeps on getting in the way of that and preventing that.

But that's the enemy trying to cut you off from where you will find the strength to endure and persevere brothers and sisters.

So this morning, the Lord wants to encourage you to connect to the body first... don't let the day-to-day struggles and challenges and obligations take you away and disconnect you from one of the ways you are strengthened to endure and overcome that adversity – because when you are getting into church, at least here at Valleyview – it will also mean you are getting into the Word and getting into the Holy Spirit as well. And we need all three of those factors for our strengthening. Amen??

Ok - 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 – His people... His Body.

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.

You see 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 had gone to great lengths to make the vineyard fruitful, but in spite of all his efforts it just 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 in this analogy, all the right things that would cause a vineyard to flourish and produce fruit have been done for it – nothing more could be done.

The location had good soil, the rocks had been cleared, the land had been tilled, He planted what 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 it. 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 it just doesn't produce fruit – what is there left to do - except walk away and let it go to ruin.

And if you remember, the encouraging words of Isaiah 41 - *"Fear Not,"* and Isaiah 43 – *"I'm doing a new thing"* from the first two sermons in October had the ruined vineyard in the background. The reality of God walking away was Israel's exile in Babylon in 597BC and the destruction of the temple in 587BC.

His vineyard went ruin... what more could He have done for it?

But brothers and sisters the good news is that God is greater than an actual vineyard owner; because while an actual 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 can make the unfruitful capable of producing fruit.

He had a plan to make His unfruitful people fruitful 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 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 again *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener..."*

There's a whole a new perspective on what Jesus is speaking about here isn't there?

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, or have more inner peace.

Instead, Jesus is making a reference to Isaiah 27 and proclaiming that He is that Vine which Isaiah prophesied 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, the vine was growing more branches and spreading – and it would eventually fill the world with more branches and the fruit that comes from the True Vine.

But it was critical that Jesus’ disciples understand and believed that He was the True Vine, and as his followers they needed to see and believe they were 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... the worship of the one true God, turning away from idolatry, covenant faithfulness to Yahweh – all embodied in Jesus himself.

So, the 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 the Jews to produce the kind of justice and righteousness and faithfulness to God 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 – the True Vine.

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 this cause 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 their calling and purpose and the fact that anyone who is a Jew can only become a true Jew through Him.

And 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 long history of being understood as the people of God – the nation of Israel.

The purpose in Jesus identifying as the vine is to help him teach His disciples about how He is re-creating a new **people** of God. That's why there are 12 disciples, to renew the 12 tribes.

So, when Jesus is speaking to his disciples about remaining in the vine it is about remaining with the new people of God that Jesus is creating – His Body, the Church. He is commanding them 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 the divisions from the prior means of convenient faithfulness that were 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 as the new people of God – in the Body of Christ that 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 was hinted in Isaiah 27 as well.

After God speaks about how He will renew the vineyard, water it and guard it and so on we find this rather strange statement in vs. 4 *“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.”*

Brothers and sisters, as I understand this it has to do with God’s relationship to the Gentile nations, He is no longer angry with Israel – because He’s renewed it, but the surrounding nations must be dealt with now.

Israel was responsible for her own covenant unfaithfulness – BUT the surrounding nations were also guilty 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, with their own blossoms and fruit.

Introducing the danger of cross-pollination which somehow that changes the vine and the kind of fruit it produces...

So, as I read this passage in Isaiah, I see God's promise to first restore the vineyard, Israel, and then He needs to deal with the surrounding nations – and its almost like His first impulse is to 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..."* Hmm – 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..."*

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.

You see brothers and sisters the good news is that we have been grafted in to the true vine – we are 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 – like a vine entwined on a trellis....

With our deeper understanding of what Jesus is saying about a new Israel – a new people of God – now we are ready to let this bear the fruit in speaking to how we need to “get-into” the Body and encouraging us in that regard.

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 current relationship, your connection, your involvement, your commitment to the Church... because it is intimately connected to your relationship with Christ. As scripture teaches us – Jesus Christ is the Head of His Body, and you can’t have a relationship with Jesus without having a

relationship with His Body as well. To try and do this is like dating a girl and saying to her, I really like you – but I’m not into your body! That’s just not how it works is it...

So – think about your relationship with the Church, with Valleyview... and realize that its actually a commentary on the true state of your relationship with Jesus.

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? This is about “getting into” the Body.

You see when a branch gets 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, like every few months. Or if it is constantly being removed and then re-inserted... coming and going for short periods of time - 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...

So brothers and sisters we need to honestly evaluate our relationship ask ourselves – do we keep pulling ourselves out of the vine?

That may take any number of forms – from the most obvious is sporadic and inconsistent participation in worship for any number of reasons. But, for what we need to be encouraged in this is where we can't allow the adversity and hardship we go through to cause us to pull back from church, because the danger is that our spiritual life dries up and we die away.

Or we may stay involved on a regular basis of some sort - but only at arm's 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 allow our fellow Christians to develop a deeper friendship with us... and so on...

How exactly might you be working against being grafted into the Vine – by pulling yourself out of it?

Now, maybe we are branches who don't fight the Gardener grafting us into the vine – we're staying in. 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.

You see it's not just about staying in the vine, but ultimately being in the vine is about bearing fruit. And somehow in all this activity we're just staying busy - but we're not bearing fruit. We're like a branch that's just sprouting shoots off in every direction but there's no fruit.

Maybe this is our way of distracting ourselves from what we are going through in our lives – but being busy, is not the same as being strengthened.

So, brothers and sisters – 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?

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 – even if we have not been cooperating as much as we should or could. That is God’s grace! Amen?

So I pray that this message will encourage you this morning – just the fact that you are here is an indication that you are cooperating with the Gardener- and that is an encouraging sign.

So, how do you build on that? Increase that cooperation? How do you remain in the vine? Well, now you know that its not good to pull back, don’t do that. Don’t give into the temptation to skip out on worship, make it a weekly priority – even if you are not scheduled to do anything. Work at arriving on time to benefit from the whole service, visit with others before and after the service – even if you hate small talk – try spiritual talk instead!

Or maybe building on the good things that God has started in you already try out some ministry opportunities, getting feedback from 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... looking at how to bear fruit.

Which may require you to do some pruning? Gardeners will often make what looks to be drastic cuts to enthusiastic but unfocused growth so the branch will bear fruit – what needs to be cut way back in your life to focus on bearing fruit in the Body?

Because this is what it means to remain in Jesus brothers and sisters, and to get into His Body - in order to be strengthened.

There are too many challenges, trials and difficulties that we will go through to not make it a priority... life is too short and eternity is too long for us not to remain in Christ, in His Body, His Church.

God is grafting you in – let’s work with the gardener, embrace what He is doing in your life, cooperate with it, and I promise you... you will be stronger, more fruitful, and rooted to overcome whatever this life throws at you.

Remain in Jesus, Get into His Body - Amen.