

A Storytelling Commentary on John 15:1-8

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In the background of this part of Jesus' last conversation with the disciples is the song of the vineyard in Isaiah 5:

*Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and
cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a
watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he
expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes. And now,
inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me
and my vineyard. What more was there to do for my vineyard that I
have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it
yield wild grapes? And now I will tell you what I will do to my
vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will
break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a
waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with
briers and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no
rain upon it. For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of
Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he
expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!
Isaiah 5:1-7 (NRSV)*

This is the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah in which the vineyard is clearly the nation of Israel; it is God's people. They are not bearing fruit, but wild grapes. What they bore was chaos. It was injustice rather than what God had in mind.

In the series of sayings recorded in John 15, Jesus builds on the memory of Isaiah's parable, which was widely internalized in the community of Israel in Jesus' day and in the community of the Jews in the time of John. The true vine is a metaphor for that which will bear good fruit. Jesus' parable begins with, "I am the true vine and my father is the vine dresser." Thus, it is grounded in the relationship between Jesus and the Father. And in this sense, Jesus becomes the vineyard. He is the focus of the vineyard that God has planted. The community of those who bear fruit is the community of Jesus; it's the community that is tied to him.

The branches that don't bear fruit are cut off. The branches that do bear fruit are pruned clean. This word in Greek has a double meaning. I think the best way to deal with translation when there are two meanings, both of which are picked up and developed, is to translate both of the meanings. So the word *cathirao* in Greek means both "to prune" and "to clean." They are made clean; that is, they are made pure and righteous by being pruned.

What is the experience to which this refers? Well, it is in part the experience of the community in the aftermath of the war in which there was such painful pruning. Many people were killed. It is also about the spiritual discipline that happens when someone who has borne fruit needs now to learn new things and to have some things cut off, some traditions cut away in order to be prepared for the new situation in which they will live. So the word of Jesus has cleansed them. It has pruned them. It has enabled them to distinguish between that which is essential and that which can be left behind.

The core of this discourse is about abiding in him. This word "abide" is a translation of the Greek word *meno*, which means "to remain" or "to stay." Abide is probably still the best English word to render what is meant by the Greek, but it has a somewhat more pietistic feeling than is present in the Greek. The word is about staying. It's about remaining with him and in him, not leaving, not getting distracted, but staying there. And whoever stays there, has an ongoing source of life and energy, creativity, bearing of fruit. That relationship is at the core of discipleship.

This whole discourse is a description of that relationship: "The branch can't bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. So also you cannot bear fruit unless you abide in me." This is part a solution to the problem of the parable of the vineyard in Isaiah. How is it that we maintain connection with God? How is it that we maintain the ability to be fruitful, to be creative, to generate new ideas? Well, it's by staying connected with the spirit of Christ and the spirit of the one who is the vine out of which the energy of the spirit flows. Jesus also identifies how important it is for abiding in him to mean abiding in his words. One of the ways to abide in Jesus is to have his words abide, stay, remain in you—to get them inside you. Then you can ask whatever you want and it will be done. There is a confidence that prayers and the requests of the people can simply be asked for and it will be done. In this God will be glorified in our bearing much fruit.

When you tell this series of sayings, focus on the listeners as the disciples. Think of this last evening as the last conversation that Jesus had with the disciples on the night before he was killed. Imagine both yourself and your listeners in that context but also in whatever context they live now. Where are they threatened? Where are they in danger of drying up and of having no energy? In virtually every local church, this is an issue. And with every person's life, it is an issue. So if you identify with the disciples' situation and use it as a metaphor for the current situation, you will have a source of energy for telling this scripture.