

A woman and her husband are sitting on the couch watching TV. The woman hears a beep indicating that she has received a text on the phone she had left in the kitchen. She goes to the kitchen to check it, and it is a text from her husband. It reads: "Please bring a beer and some chips on your way back."

I read that all flights from John Lennon Airport were cancelled this week. Imagine. All the people.

I found that I have been happier since I changed from coffee in the morning to orange juice. My doctor explained that it's the vitamin C and natural sugars. I think it's just the Vodka.

OK, down to business. John's gospel has seven I AM sayings, all using the name revealed to Moses in Exodus 3:14: "I AM WHO I AM." They are I AM the bread of life (Jn 6:35); I AM the light of the world (Jn 8:12); I AM the door (Jn 10:7); I AM the good shepherd (Jn 10:11); I AM the resurrection and the life (Jn 11:25); I AM the way and the truth and the life (Jn 14:6); and today we hear the 7th and last: I AM the true vine (Jn 15:1). We are also told that WE are the branches. Now when Jesus spoke about vines and vineyards, the people of Israel knew what He was talking about. It was an industry that had been carefully cultivated throughout the country for centuries. It was crucial because it was a cash crop as opposed to grain, which was raised purely for consumption. In early America the essential crop was corn, but the cash crop was tobacco. It was, therefore, vital to the economy of the land.

Vines are a very rugged crop in one way – and in another sense it is a very delicate fruit that requires being treated with kid gloves. Sound like us?! A young vine is not permitted to bear fruit for the first 3 years. It is therefore drastically pruned in December and January to preserve its energy. The particular branches that do not bear fruit are cut out to further conserve the energy of the plant. If this constant cutting back is not done, the result would be a crop that is not up to its full potential.

So when Jesus spoke about vineyards, certainly the people could identify with it, as a person in Iowa would know about corn, or in North Carolina about tobacco or cotton. It didn't make any difference whether or not you were in that business. You had grown up around it enough that you would still be familiar with it.

But a vineyard was also the symbol of the nation. It was a kind of national identity. Over and over again in the Old Testament, Israel is pictured as the vine or the vineyard of the Lord. Isaiah the prophet pictured Israel as the vineyard of God. He said: The vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. In Jeremiah, we read God referring to His chosen people in this way: I planted you as a choice vine. Hosea spoke a word of judgment when he said: Israel has become an empty vine. Josephus, the Roman historian, informs us that over the Temple in Jerusalem was carved an exquisite, gold leaf grapevine. It stood as a symbol of national unity. Israel itself was, in the eyes of its people, the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Jesus likened Himself to a vine, while the fruit bearing branches are the disciples. God the farmer is depicted as the one who cultivates the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is properly nourished. He takes pride in his crop. But this means that He also prunes the vines and removes the dead wood. The grapes hang on to the branches. What Jesus is saying is clear. The disciples should receive their strength from Jesus. He is the true vine. If they break away from Him, they will be like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit. They then will have to be pruned out.

Second, what do we make of this in our own lives? The question that we must all answer is: Are we bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God? How can we tell a pear tree? By the fruit it bears. How can people tell

if we are a follower of Christ? By the fruit that we bear. It is just as simple as that. The fruits of the vine are not mass attendance, or Bible knowledge or how much of the catechism we have studied. Even though all of those things are important and can be helpful, the true fruit of the vine is a loving, kind and compassionate life. It all comes down to how we treat other people. That is as simple and direct as I can put it.

I remember a particular woman who was in the first parish I served a million years ago. Before I even met her, everyone was telling me about her. They were saying: She is such a religious person. It was true that she was at Mass every day, she was a Eucharistic Minister, and seemed to be at every event the parish had. She brought up the subject of religion in every conversation. She almost didn't know how to carry on a simple conversation without bringing religion up. I didn't have any problem with any of those things. The problem that I had was that when it came to people who were down in society – the poor, the unemployed, the divorced, alcoholics, immigrants – she was relentless in her criticism. She was without mercy and compassion. There was judgment and nothing else. After a while, despite all of those outward appearances of religion, and despite everyone calling her a 'religious' person, I thought: "Does this person really bear the fruits of the Christian life?"

The issue is not how much knowledge we have or even how sincere we are. The issue is how do we treat people? If we are in Christ, people will be able to see the fruits of our life in terms of our compassion and love and attitude. And the fact that we are ATTACHED to one another, means that we all succeed – or fail – together. One vine, many branches. (all of this adapted from SERMON AND WORSHIP RESOURCES, Brett Blair "I Am The True Vine," John 15:1-17)

Third, a story to illustrate. In 2021, the actor, filmmaker and playwright Tyler Perry was honored with the Jean Hersholt Humanitarian Award at the Oscars. The Jean Hersholt award is given by the Motion Picture Academy to an individual whose humanitarian efforts and charitable work are a credit to the film industry.

In accepting the award, Perry told a story about an encounter that was an epiphany for him. Perry's production company had rented a downtown building for a film shoot. As he was walking to his car one day, he saw out of the corner of his eye a woman coming up the street. From her appearance, Perry assumed she was homeless and began to pull out his wallet. "I reached into my pocket, and I was about to give her money," Perry recalled. "She said, 'Excuse me, sir. Do you have any shoes?' It stopped me cold because I remember being homeless and having one pair of shoes and they were bent over at the heels. I said 'Yeah.'"

Perry took the woman into the studio's wardrobe department. She hesitated to go in, but Perry assured her it would be all right. They went through boxes and racks of clothes. They found a pair of shoes and Perry helped her put them on. Perry stood up, waiting for her to look up – but all this time she was looking down. The woman finally looked up. With tears in her eyes, she said, "Thank you, Jesus, my feet are off the ground!"

"In that moment," Perry said, "I recall her saying to me, 'I thought you would hate me for asking.' I said, 'How can I hate you when I used to be you?'"

My spiritual director used to say "It's not 'there but for the grace of God go I,' but 'there go I,' because we are connected to one another, whether we realize it or not. We are connected to one another through Christ and in Christ; we are branches of the same 'vine,' a vine that is the source of nurture and support in the life and love of God. While it's easy to recognize all that differentiates us and separates us from one another, Jesus challenges us to seek what brings us together, what unites us, what makes us one in the Spirit of God's compassion and peace. As branches of Christ the vine, we are part of something greater than ourselves,

something which transforms and transcends the fragility of our lives into the full meaning of life in the compassion and peace of Christ. Let the church say Amen. (last section adapted from CONNECTIONS, 28 April 2024, Fifth Sunday of Easter)

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