



DEXTER UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

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**Heard It Through the Grapevine?**

**by Jan Alford**

John 15:1-8

Good morning

Well, it's spring

it's May

it must be Annual Conference if there's

someone different preaching

Yes, today I get the opportunity

to preach which is always a joyful time

for me.

But . . . this opportunity

is even better than usual.

You see, when I read the gospel lectionary scripture

I thought –

Oh good – something I really understand.

At last, a passage that

I won't have to spend

hours researching

reading commentaries

reading what other preachers

have said

reading, reading, reading.

And . . . on top of that

this is one of those Jesus stories

and they are not my

favorite kind of teachings.

Oh, I understand that Jesus

used parables and stories for a very good reason.

It was a good way

to help the people

understand his teachings.

It related to their life.

But, quite frankly, they often go

right over my head.

Simply because,  
I didn't live 2000 years ago  
I don't know the same things  
that these Biblical people knew.  
Our daily experiences are quite different.

Take for instance  
the parable of the soils  
I don't know a thing about soil  
that may work for LeRoy Wing  
but not for me

Or the story of the rich young man  
I'm not rich  
I'm not young  
and I'm not a man

Also things have changed  
in the past 2000 years.  
Telling me some of these stories would be like me  
telling the disciples about  
the web and cell phones.

Completely out of my realm  
of experience.  
But . . . this one is different!  
I understand.

The grapevine!  
Sure I know about grapevines.  
We have a slightly wild area  
by our house  
and I've had to hack down  
these great big vines.

These wild vines  
just take over  
they climb up trees  
go across the canopy to another tree

I've also made  
grapevine wreaths –  
for the church bazaar sales  
I vaguely remember going to Bea Christopherson's home  
to make wreaths for the bazaar  
I've hung them in my home.  
Yes, this is something  
I know about.

And so today  
I brought in  
some grapevines

to talk with you.

So, first of all

God (interrupting): Jan

Jan (looking around but continues talking): As I was saying.....

God (stronger voice): Jan

Jan (looking around again – asks the congregation)

Did you hear that?

God: Yes, they heard me.

Jan: Who are you?

God: The Big Guy

Jan: Matt, you're suppose to be in Adrian.

God: No! the really Big Guy

Jan: God?

God: Of course! Don't you recognize my voice?

Jan: Well – not really. But anyway, this isn't a good time to talk.

I hate to be rude but I am a bit busy right now.

I'm trying to preach. I'm trying to explain this story  
to these fine folks.

That's my job here today

God: Oh yes, I know. But before you get too completely messed up,  
I had to intervene.

Jan: What do you mean messed up?

God: Well my dear – did you research this scripture well?

Jan: No – I . . .

God: May I gently inform you. You're on the wrong track. This is  
not about wild grapevines.

Jan: Oh, yeah, but I just thought . . .

God: May I ask – have you every been a vine keeper in a vineyard?

Jan: Oh God, you know we're United Methodist. We don't drink wine and such

God: Yes I know. I haven't quite figured that out yet. But anyway . . .

you're on the wrong track. There's a huge difference between wild  
grapevines and the grapevines in this story.

Jan: Really?

God: Let me refer you to some good reading . . . try Bruce Wilkinson's  
little book "The Secrets of the Vine." That should help you quite a  
bit.

Jan: Well OK – I was hoping to save time on this sermon.

But, if you say so

God: Yes, I say so.

Jan: Well, feel free to interrupt again . . . but I thought this was your day off

God: Yes it should be, but I need to attend to a few other misguided preachers  
this morning. So . . . carry on . . .

And so . . . the rest of this sermon

I must give credit

so I won't be accused of plagiarism  
to Bruce Wilkenson  
author of Secret of the Vine.

If you look at wild untended grapevines  
they do look entirely different  
from ones grown purposefully.

Wild, undisciplined grapevines are  
all tangled up  
They grow any which way  
They produce these  
puny little grapes  
that are only good  
to feel the wild birds.

But grapevines that are planted  
cared for  
disciplined  
tended  
They produce  
abundance  
ABUNDANCE

Huge clusters of grapes  
So many it's hard to believe  
So sweet, so succulent.

Yes, this is the abundant life  
that God promises.  
"You shall have life, and have it  
abundantly."

But it does not come  
without discipline  
or without tending  
without sacrifice.  
But it can happen.

As Jesus was preparing to depart this earth  
He gave some  
last minute instructions  
to the disciples.

He said "I am the true vine. My Father  
is the vinegrower."

Think about a real vineyard  
So well kept  
everything is neat  
as our lives should be.

The trunk of the grapevine  
grows out of the ground

then straight up a trellis  
neat, trim, disciplined.

The vine breaks out from the trunk  
at 36" or so  
and grown horizontally  
along the trellis.

Then the branches grow  
out from the vine.

With the vine kept  
up in the air

And the branches  
tumbling down from it  
the clusters of grapes  
are more likely  
to get the maximum sun  
and fresh air  
to enable growth.

Jesus is that vine

With outstretched arms  
Jesus is there  
Taking the nourishment  
from the ground and the trunk  
and passing it on to the branches.

The branches growing off the vine  
they have one, and only one, job  
To produce fruit  
To grow a big cluster of grapes.

We are the branches

We are those things  
growing off of the vine.  
The vine called Jesus Christ  
And our sole purpose in life  
is to produce fruit.

Got it? You are to produce fruit.

That's your job.  
big clusters  
Sweet  
Succulent  
Dazzling fruit.

But . . . your fruits take on  
a slightly different form.

Your fruits are actions  
Actions as a result of your  
connections to Jesus.

Jesus, the vine, feeds you, the branches,  
and you the branches,  
bear fruit.

What do we call this fruit –  
Well, it's not concord, nor riesling  
cabernet

It is fruit called love,  
joy, peace, kindness, goodness,  
faithfulness, gentleness,  
self-control  
That is your fruit.

It is fruit of the spirit  
the best tasting fruit of all.  
Fruit that nourishes the soul.

But – have you ever felt  
like you really weren't producing  
That your crop was puny  
undernourished  
weak, shriveled up  
dropping off the vine.

Well – that can happen in life.  
So let me tell you  
how God behaves in those circumstances.  
How God will try to  
turn your life around.

First, we must accept that  
we are all created for fruit.  
Fruit glorifies God.

But . . . sadly, we sometimes  
have times in our lives when  
we don't produce fruit.  
Long dry spells  
No joy, no love, no kindness,  
no goodness, no peace  
no faithfulness.

Our fruits are not growing  
We are like grapevines that  
are wallowing in the mud and dirt.  
No growth is possible  
Being in the dirt and grime of life  
We don't get nourished by  
the sun or the fresh air.

And we all have  
a bit in our lives that is dirty and grimy.

Whether that is being unforgiving,  
judgmental, arrogant, selfish,  
uncaring, broken relationships, and on and on.

There is no one without a bit  
of dirt – after all  
we are all human.

But God teats us just the way  
the vine keeper treats the wayward branch.  
He picks us up out of the mud  
washes us off  
and lifts us up to start growing  
in a new direction.

But as lovely as that sounds,  
it can hurt.  
It is a form of discipline.

We have to get rid of that dirt  
and it's not quite as easy as  
the grape leaf that gets dunked in water.

We need to work  
on a conscious level  
to help rid ourselves of our  
unclean habits.  
We need to grow  
in a new direction  
which feels foreign and uncomfortable.

But that is God's way.  
If we aren't producing fruit  
which is the purpose of our lives,  
God will intervene  
and discipline us  
helping us to clean up our acts  
and grow in new and fruitful ways.

And that is not the end of it.  
This gentle discipline is only the beginning.  
It may hurt a little  
But being given  
new opportunities is a great start.

Next we have to  
understand what the vine keeper  
does once the branch is out of the mud  
and growing in the right direction.

Then the branch gets pruned.  
Yes, pruned. Ouch – that hurts.  
God's next intent is for you

to sacrifice the unnecessary  
the immature, the extraneous,  
the low priorities of life.

As the vine keeper prunes the branches,  
it encourages the plant to save  
its energy.

This energy is put into the growth of  
abundant fruit  
rather than just more leaves.

God does that to us too

Pruning hurts –

Although we may be growing  
in the right direction

We may still need pruning  
to develop more fruit

Rather than

spend our time and energy  
on things that are  
inconsequential.

Things that don't bring  
glory to God

Our time to live is limited  
so God prunes us  
so that we can

produce more fruit for  
the kingdom.

It's not easy

It hurts

But it is a necessary part  
of the Christian life.

Know that pruning is giving you  
new direction and growth.

And third,

When your life produces more fruit  
God invites you to abide more deeply  
with Him.

That word "abiding"

it's not one that we use much  
in our daily conversations

It almost sounds archaic  
to me.

To abide –

to dwell in  
to linger with

to endure together  
to stay and sustain.

Your closeness  
your friendship  
your relationship with God  
grows.

You long for,  
you thirst for,  
you love and respond  
to God.

There will be more God in your life  
more God in your  
day to day  
thought and activities.

To attain and sustain abiding  
you must have  
quality time with God.

You didn't fall in love with your spouse  
by not spending time together.  
Remember – at least some of you –  
meeting that special person  
dating, talking,  
writing notes or letters.

You just wanted to be together  
time together  
in each others presence  
and that's how you built  
that loving relationship.

It is the same with God.  
There is no abiding  
without the time and devotion  
to the relationship.

And soon that time with God  
is not just a five minute  
Let's read the Upper Room page for today  
But an all day walk together.

Abiding is not a brief time together  
it's an all out 24/7 commitment  
To your relationship with God.

And so the parable of the vine  
teaches us that  
like the wayward leaf in the mud –  
God lifts us up  
Washes us clean of sins

and starts us on a new path.

As we start to grow

We will get pruned

So we can produce more fruit.

And when your life

bears much fruit

you will be in a deeper

stronger relationship with God.

And it will get so strong

that you will be abiding in God

and God will abide in you.

Amen