

This passage is set in the context of Jesus' farewell, in which Jesus tries to prepare his followers for what is to come: arrest, torture, and execution.

John 15:1-8

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that **bears no fruit**. Every branch that **bears fruit** he prunes to make it **bear more fruit**. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴*Abide in me as I abide in you*. Just as the branch cannot **bear fruit** by itself unless it *abides* in the vine, neither can you unless *you abide* in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who *abide* in me and I in them **bear much fruit** because apart from me, you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not *abide* in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you *abide* in me, and my words *abide* in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that **you bear much fruit** and become my disciples.

The Word of God

The Word of Life

When I was young, I loved my electric train. Sometimes, my friends and I would set up three trains and get them running together on separate tracks. Sometimes, they would stop if a wire wasn't connected well and came loose, and sometimes, they would jump the track if it was not connected snugly from one section to another. We need good, solid connections to Jesus to perform as we should.

As Will Willimon said, we often talk of the love of Jesus, but what Jesus expects from us is equally important. He expects us to bear good fruit. We have another of Jesus' I AM statements to guide us in this: I Am the True Vine, and you are the branches. It's crucial to understand that we must abide in Jesus to bear good fruit for God, for that is our purpose. Jesus emphasizes that those who abide in him and he in them bear much fruit because apart from him, we can do nothing. These two ideas, bearing fruit and abiding, are repeated repeatedly in this passage, underscoring their importance. Abide and Bear Fruit means living a connected and productive life, essential for our well-being. A life lived in relationship to God through Jesus and each other keeps us

connected. Because of those connections, our lives can grow with deeds of love and compassionate service.

Bearing fruit is vital for our lives, hence the expression of living a fruitful life of meaning, purpose, and accomplishment. This is the life every hungry heart yearns for. Jesus warns we cannot live a fruitful life without our connectedness.

At first glance, Jesus' words seem wrong. We have achieved much, amassed wealth, gained societal recognition, served in many ways, and accomplished many things. This would be called a fruitful life by many. Indeed, most days, we don't think or act like everything we achieve and accomplish depends on God.

Yet, if we allow ourselves a moment or two of quiet, we will recognize a deeper hunger within us, a yearning that material success can't satisfy and no amount of money, things, or trophies can provide. They cannot bear the weight of giving us meaning and purpose or a fruitful life. We need what Robin Sharma aptly calls the wealth that money can't buy, a spiritual fulfillment that only a life of faithful connections and actions can provide.

This is precisely the kind of life God promises—a bountiful life that the Bible labels bearing fruit. We can do a lot without Jesus, but we can do a lot more with him as the vine that anchors us to a relationship with God. This provides us with the basis of a fruitful life filled with purpose and meaning. Bearing fruit is part of our essential nature; it is who we are.

Jesus is talking about bearing fruit, an image for living a life of faithful trust and action. We must live that life with the mutuality Jesus is speaking of. Without the anchor in Jesus, our lives will not have the sustenance they need for the abundant life Jesus promises. Without abiding connections, we will wither. We need strong connections to bear fruit; our connections determine the quality of our fruit and our lives. Without this connection, we may just be growing weeds at worst and, at best, living a life that could be even better.

The metaphor of vine and branches captures this. It is not only I AM, but also YOU ARE a powerful WE ARE deeply related: To God, with Jesus, to our neighbor, and with our true self.

This relationship is not just one way. We all know John 3:16 and God's love for the world revealed in Jesus. Well, we are the way God shows love for the world. I like this because we need God, and God needs us to show God's love through our faith and actions. As God sent Jesus, God now sends us to show God's love for the world, emphasizing our integral role in this mission.

We have heard the wonder words of Theresa of Avila:

Christ Has No Hands, But Ours

Teresa of Avila (1515-1582)

Christ Has No Body

Christ has no body but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks.
 Compassion on this world,
 Yours are the feet with which he walks to do good,
 Yours are the hands, with which he blesses all the world.
 Yours are the hands, yours are the feet,
 Yours are the eyes; you are his body.
 Christ has no body now but yours,
 No hands, no feet on earth but yours,
 Yours are the eyes with which he looks
 Compassion on this world.
 Christ has no body now on earth but yours.
 We are God's loving agents in the world.

When we stay connected to the vine, Jesus, we can't help but bear fruit, thus showing God's love to the world. But we can't do this if we lose our connectedness. Spiritual growing or dying is the issue here, for if we lose that connection and don't bear fruit, our spirits die as we lose contact with God and wither away.

So, what are some of the things we can do to maintain our connections that enable us to bear fruit? I will list them as my progression, but these are like a circle, and you can begin anywhere.

Prayer and devotions, including Bible Study, are essential personal anchors that keep us connected. I have started posting on our Facebook page D365 devotions for folks to use if they don't have a daily plan for themselves. You can also look up D365 and subscribe yourself.

Gratitude. We also need to be aware of the enormity of the blessings we receive from God and be willing to share those blessings with others. Adam Hamiton, who has served as the basis for our Adult Sunday Bible Class, starts his daily prayers with Thank you, Thank you, Thank you. Starting the day with gratitude helps us focus on the good in life throughout the day. Oh sure, we can't avoid the tragedies of war, famine, bigotry and discrimination, loss and grief. They seem inescapable, but negativity can poison our outlook and render us hopeless. Gratitude is not pollyannaish but a genuine tool for facing each day.

Worship is when we gather with other people who choose to make time for Jesus in their lives. It's not to hear me; there are many better preachers online, but it is to gather with people who know us, love us, and pray for us. They help us remember to keep our eyes turned to God and let God feed us with what we need to maintain our connection to God, the world, and one another. As Jesus puts it, this helps us keep our connection with him, the vine.

Maintain connections with others. We need to build genuine relationships based on honesty and love. Social media connects us to so many friends, and that has helped us keep up with what others are doing and often like or comment on their posts. We may have 1000 or more social media friends, but they can't replace a few close, trusted friends. We need those deeper connections and must nurture them.

Personal contact is so vital for us. We know that during COVID-19, people in nursing homes died from failure to thrive because they were cut off from social interaction with others. We all need the human touch.

I have served the presbytery in many positions and will declare that I love in-person rather than Zoom meetings. I know some are inevitable and part of life, but if I have a choice, it is in person rather than Zoom. Something about being with other people is vital to our lives. I would usually rather drive to Buffalo than attend a meeting over Zoom.

Pruning is essential. Saying NO can help us bear the best, something I am not good at. Sometimes, we have to say no or goodbye to things, even people who keep us from abiding by Jesus and bearing the best fruit. When folks continually bring us

down with negativity and venom, we may need some divine pruning to be even more fruitful.

In addition, sometimes I do things out of habit or fear that no one else will do it if I don't. If we ask God and our close friends, they can help us with that by enabling us to discern where we need to be and what we need to be doing and helping us find those places of joy in our lives. They can help us say "No" to those things that need pruning so we can grow stronger. Sometimes, we discover that the task didn't need to be done in the first place. As Robin Sharma said the other day, it is a waste to do something well that doesn't need to be done at all. We are busy being busy, which keeps us from genuinely bearing the best fruit.

Engaging in acts of love, personal compassion, and social justice bears good fruit. Both are essential. Working for justice and peace in our society is not enough. We must also be open to individual, one-on-one acts of kindness. Most of us prefer one of the two, but whichever one we prefer, we can't let the other one wither. We must focus on both to bear the best fruit.

Our connection to God and each other through Jesus enables the kind of abundant life that God wants for us. We are connected to our true selves, and these connections ensure that we bear good fruit.

So, dear friends, let us abide in Jesus and bear good fruit.