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## Vines

(John 15:1-13 NRSV) "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You 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. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. 12 "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

It is very dangerous to have me, of all people, preach on a passage whose opening image is a horticultural one. Those who have known me a little while are laughing at the thought of *me* trying to say something learned about plants or flowers or vines. It is especially daunting and silly for me to attempt to say something about such things in a congregation that has gardeners like Carol Wilson and her talented team of volunteers. Because if these folks have a green thumb, I am the opposite: I've been told I have a black thumb. All of my life I have managed to kill most of the houseplants that have ever had the misfortune to be under my care. In fact, one of the items on Barbara's large to-do list before she begins her interim ministry in Oregon is to figure out what to do about her plants. Because she knows, from sad experience, that despite the extensive instructions she has left me in the past for tending the plants I usually failed miserably and she would often return to find her plants in need of hospice care. A friend of mine, in fact, once told me that I could probably kill plastic plants.

So I approach this particular "I am" saying of Jesus from the gospel of John with a bit of trepidation, because there are so many others who could likely better truly

understand Jesus' image about the vine and the branches. But nonetheless, let me give it my best shot, for this is an important and complex passage. It starts with this vine and branches and gardener image - trying to say something poetically about the nature of the relationship between God and Christ and believers -- and it ends up with those soaring and sobering words about laying down one's life for one's friends. There is indeed a great deal going on here, so let us see what Jesus' "I am the vine" statement -- the second of his "I am" statements from the gospel of John that we are looking at in this short sermon series -- might mean and what it might teach us.

But I want to start, in fact, with the end of this passage: *"No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."* We have heard that passage many, many times. It is stark and it is powerful. There are those of you in this room who know that this passage is no hypothetical thing either, but very, very real. You've seen it happen, not just metaphorically but literally. And we give thanks for such people who have literally laid down their lives for their friends and for a higher purpose -- and stand in awe of them. But this passage also has something to teach about the more ordinary days of our lives, and the more ordinary connections we have with one another. For look at Jesus' words carefully -- he is talking about the "greatest love" that one can offer or give, but the whole context of this passage -- starting with the musings about the vines and branches -- should also make us think about those other kinds of loves in our lives, the more ordinary, garden variety, here and now, everyday, day by day, kinds of love.

And this is where looking at the passage in its original language can be instructive. Because an alternative way of translating that phrase "lay down one's life" is this: "to lean your soul upon." *"To lean your soul upon."* Doesn't that suggest a whole new way of looking at things here? To put the point simply, while the most familiar translation is talking about **dying** for someone out of love, when we translate his words in this other way we see that he Jesus also implying something about what you **live for** and what you **live by**, what

your “soul leans on” in its life.

So with that translation, that angle, what does the passage also suggest about how we live out our greatest love? That the greatest love is to lean trustingly on the arms of the those who are your friends. Open yourself up in trust to those who are your truest friends. Allow yourself to be vulnerable to those whom you love. Hold on to your truest friends who give you life. But here’s the thing: there are many, many things in our world, in our culture, in our lives that **pretend** to be our friends but really aren’t, are they? There are many things that whisper in our ears or shout in our faces, ***“I’m your friend; lean on me. I’m your friend; give your life to me.”*** There is, for example, the seductive call of a consumerist culture that says that it is in buying and having and getting the latest stuff or toys or goodies that you find your friend, something to lean your life on. But that’s a false friend; not a friend to lean on. Or there is the adrenalin-pumping call of that supposed friend who shouts over the nasty talk radio stations and says “Lean your life on conspiracy theories and never assume the best about people but always presume the worst.” Oh my, that one is a seductive one, isn’t it, playing to our fears and our worst traits instead of our hopes and our best traits. But that’s a false friend; not a friend to lean on. Or there is the supposed friend of a culture that is absolutely suffused with the message that the only things that matters is yourself, that you should “take care of yourself,” everyone else be damned. That supposed friend is everywhere; just go into any bookstore or to Amazon and take a look at title after title in the “self-help” section that counsels you to look out for number one. But that’s a false friend; not a friend to lean on. And, moreover, that supposed friend is related to the one who is constantly whispering to you that you really shouldn’t trust anyone, that the people, the group, the church, you’re associate with are too conservative or too liberal, and you need to put up fences around your life so to make sure that nobody who doesn’t have the “right” opinions or beliefs somehow “pollutes” your life. But that’s a false friend; not a friend to lean on.

You've heard all of those false friends, haven't you? And, if you're like me, you've even sometimes given in to them, leaned on them at some time. Maybe it was in a moment when you stopped trying to understand someone who seemed different and settled for leaning on an old stereotype, even though it's a hurtful one. Maybe it was in a moment when you chose to believe something you heard on the radio or posted on Facebook instead of the testimony of those who actually know. I mean, if it's on the internet, it must be true, right? Or maybe the false friends whispering in your ear inviting you to lean on them are more personal; maybe your false friend is that voice of pessimism that say "It won't work; let's don't even try it" when faced with the opportunity to do a new thing or with someone who is on-fire about a new idea. Maybe your false friend is that voice that keeps telling you that you should nurse that old hurt and anger and bitterness for years and years. I don't know what your particular false friend's voice may sound like, but I'll bet you have them, slyly and seductively calling your name, inviting you to lean on them, telling you that they have the secret of a satisfied life.

But they don't. And that is why Jesus begins this teaching with the vines and the branches and the gardener. And I think he's trying to say two things with this image. First he's trying to say that it is just about impossible to live a good and abundant life apart from a community of people, of friends, who are striving together to be the best people that they can be. And, second, he's trying to say something about who these friends really and truly are, so that when push comes to shove you won't be giving your life up for or even leaning your soul upon anything less than something that is truly worthy. So let's now turn back to the first part of this passage; hear Jesus' words again: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.... 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. I am the vine, you are the branches....*” The first thing I want to note is that there have been some terrible misuses and misinterpretations, in my opinion, of this passage. There are some who have focused with what almost seems like glee on the “pruning part” and use it as a threat, a weapon to make folks anxious, worried about whether they measure up, worried about whether God is going to somehow slice them off. But that’s not really Jesus’ emphasis here.

No, his emphasis in this imagery is that branches cannot exist all by themselves. Even I, terrible gardener that I am, know enough to realize that if you take a branch off of a plant and set it all by itself, away from the vine, away from the soil in which the vine is rooted, away from the other branches that make that plant a living and growing organism, you’ll soon have a dead and withered piece of wood. One simply cannot be the best Christian without being a part of a community, a living organism of branches connected to the vine that is Christ. Professor Tex Sample tells the story of a man who he met on the airplane once who, in the course of their conversation, said “I’m spiritual but I don’t belong to any church; I’m religious but I’m not part of any church.” But Sample pressed him, and said “Do you play any sports?” The man responded, “Why, yes, I play softball; I’m the pitcher for our neighborhood league.” And then Sample said, “Well, what if I told you that I too was a pitcher, but when you asked me what team I played for, I said ‘I don’t have a team; I don’t believe in teams. I’m a pitcher but I pitch fo any team. I just pitch.’”?

Sort of silly-sounding, huh? The very idea of “being a pitcher” just makes no sense apart from being a part of a team. And Jesus’ image is also saying something like what Sample is getting at: it’s terribly, terribly hard to be a Christian without the sustaining interconnectedness of a community of believers. Folks who are there to hold you up, to sometimes tell you you’re going the wrong way, to pray for you, to love you even with all your warts. While God continues to love those who, like a branch taken off a plant and put all by itself, want to not be a part of such a community, Jesus is saying that Christian life

will be so much less than what it could be when we are rooted in a community of faith.

And the second point in this passage about vines and branches and gardeners that I think is good to focus on is this: When Jesus says “I am the vine” and then goes on to say “Abide in me... so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete” he is saying very much what my mother used to say when I was small: “Be careful who you pick to be your friends.” Now he’s not saying that that means you can’t or shouldn’t have Buddhist friends or Mormon friends or Jewish friends or even non-believer friends. God is not that small. But what I think that He is saying is that if you, as a Christian, do not have a group of Christian friends, a Christian community, to whom you return regularly to worship with you won’t be able to deal as well with life as you might otherwise, and your joy will not be as complete. Because – and back to that image of the pruning of the vines that has sometimes been so misused – sometimes there are things that need to be pruned from your life and mine. Sometimes we need to find a way to prune our unwarranted anger, or our jealousies, or our sense of despair, or a dozen other things that may be those sly, seductive voices that want to be your false friends. And it is easier to do so when you have the love and care and support – and even sometimes the gentle, loving feedback when you’ve lost your way – of those who gather as the church. The church is the one place that you ought to be able to be vulnerable, the church is the one place where you ought to be able to find help in shushing those voices of those false friends. Writer Anne Lamott once said this about her teenage son who no longer wanted, at that time, to attend worship, but hers are words that apply far more widely: “...I believe he will almost certainly come back,” she says, “because life will do what life does, which is to become incredibly hard and confusing. There will be losses he barely survives. And at some point someone will say [to

him], 'Do you want to come to this funny little church I've found?'"<sup>1</sup> Thanks be to God that is an invitation that we all have heard at one time or another in our lives, and it is an invitation that I hope we, in turn, share whenever we can.

In fact, that is my commission to both you and to me this week: to look for those people who seem like a branch pulled from the vine, who seem to be off by themselves and who have little to support and nourish them. To be attuned to those folks who seem unhappily alone, who have listened to the voices of too many false friends and who are the worse off for it. To be attentive for those ones whose isolation is sapping their souls, who are dying off the vine. And when you find these ones, to say them, "Hey do you want to come to this funny little church I've found?" Can we do that? Can we?

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<sup>1</sup>Eva Stimson, "Anne Lamott's Subversive Faith," Presbyterians Today, June 2002  
<http://www.pcusa.org/today/cover/june02/cover.htm>