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## I Am/We Are: A Series on Jesus' "I Am" Statements V. Pruning & Possibility; Joy & Judgment

John 15:1-12 The Message "I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn't bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken. Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me. I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can't produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples. I've loved you the way my Father has loved me. Make yourselves at home in my love. If you keep my commands, you'll remain intimately at home in my love. That's what I've done—kept my Father's commands and made myself at home in his love. I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you."

We come to the last in this sermon series on Jesus' "I am" statements in the gospel of John. In the last four weeks, we've looked at how Jesus has tried to teach us more about both him and ourselves when he said that he is the bread, the light, the shepherd and the gate, and, of course, perhaps most famously and belovedly, the resurrection and the life. We've seen that the temptation to view these statements as exclusionary is wrong, and that they are in fact ways that Jesus wants to widen the circle of those who know the gracious and unconditional love of God. And we've seen how it is a tragic and theologically irresponsible mistake to see these statements as somehow indicating that Christians have replaced the Jewish people in God's love; no, what we have learned is that Jesus is the one who gratefully and gladly shows that God's love is actually a love for all of creation, and that we Christians who know that love through Jesus are able to do so because of the Jewish people and God's gracious

gift of the law and the teachings to them expressing that unconditional love. For as St. Paul puts it so eloquently, we have been “grafted onto” the Jewish people’s identity and history.

And so with that very image, in fact, we now are at the final of these statements where Jesus says “I am the vine.” But let me confess something: this is the statement that I have least looked forward to preaching on. There are three reasons for that. First, the passage is not succinct and compact like some of the other sayings; no, it seems to wander all over the place and talks about grapes and farmers and harvests and twigs and pruning and more. Secondly, though, I’m always just a little leery about preaching on a horticultural or agricultural image, for despite Melba Mayall’s earnest efforts I remain one who really doesn’t care to eat his vegetables and so for me to write about plants is like, as one comic once put it, a fish trying to ride a bicycle. If those vines that Jesus talks about produced bacon or shrimp I could get a lot more excited. But third, and most seriously, I read these lines about folks being “pruned” and the deadwood getting thrown on the fire and I wince at knowing just how much these and similar passages have been gleefully abused by too many folks who have taken and continue to take pleasure in naming those folks whom they judge to be wanting and will be thrown into the fires of hell:

- The San Antonio pastor who declared that welfare recipients do not deserve to eat<sup>1</sup>;
- the New York pastor who said that God will send cancer and strokes to those who support equality and civil rights for gay and lesbian and transgendered folks<sup>2</sup>;

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.ifyouonlynews.com/human-interest/christian-pastor-john-hagee-welfare-recipients-dont-deserve-to-live/>

<sup>2</sup><http://www.rawstory.com/2014/07/harlem-pastor-god-curses-homo-supporters-with-cancer-hiv-syphilis-then-hell/>

- the ostensibly Christian leader who told parents that they should isolate themselves from and shun their gay family members until they “repent”<sup>3</sup>;
- the Christian leader with hundreds of thousands of followers who pined for the so-called good ol’ days when the father of an unmarried pregnant daughter would have slammed the door in her face and kicked her out of their home because she was “stained”<sup>4</sup>;
- those folks from Westboro who picket the funerals of American soldiers and shout the vilest slogans at grieving family members,

and on and on and on.

But you don’t have to cite such dire examples of folks mistakenly deciding that this passage is calling them to decide who is going to be “pruned” and “thrown in the fire.” The always eloquent and thoughtful Christian writer and speaker Rachel Held Evans says this:

Growing up, I heard a lot of Christians say that if we get our theology wrong, if we make mistakes in how we understand the Trinity or atonement or religious pluralism, we risk getting spewed out of God's mouth and sent straight to hell for all of eternity.... It's a frightful thing - thinking you have to get God right in order to get God to love you, thinking you're always one error away from damnation.<sup>5</sup>

And, my friends, what she cites is exactly part of the reason for the seemingly dramatic results released this week, and commented on everywhere, of a study<sup>6</sup> by the Pew Foundation which seems to suggest that the United States is growing dramatically less

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.rawstory.com/2014/06/ca-pastor-orders-christians-to-isolate-lgbt-kids-and-the-n-turn-them-over-to-satan/>

<sup>4</sup><http://www.rawstory.com/2014/07/pat-robertson-parents-could-kick-out-an-unmarried-stained-woman-in-the-old-days/>

<sup>5</sup><https://www.facebook.com/rachelheldevans.page/posts/10153062213454442>

<sup>6</sup><http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> I am grateful to Barbara Blaisdell for her insight in suggesting this way of reading the study’s results.

Christian, particularly among those who, like Ms. Evans, are “Millennials,” twenty- and thirty-somethings. But that’s over-simple. If you drill down into this 60+ page study what you realize is that Millennials are simply more honest. There have always been a significant number of Baby Boomers who really weren’t affiliated much with any Christian tradition but who still thought it important to claim to be. But Millennials are far less willing to say what they don’t believe and feel and mean, and what other studies that the Pew folks and others have done continue to confirm that among the chief reasons that Millennials are increasingly unwilling to identify as “Christian” is that they believe that the Church has focused too much on judgment and too little on grace, that it has spent too much time and energy “bashing” on gay folks, that it has seemed to often want to equate a narrow understanding of politics with the Christian faith and has been eager to judge those who don’t subscribe to those beliefs as not truly Christian. And, increasingly, they want little part of what feels like the hypocrisy of it all.

What’s the answer? And how does all this relate to our scripture of the morning and Jesus’ complicated words about vines and pruning and grapes? Well, do you remember the Apostle Paul’s words about communion? *“Everyone ought to examine themselves before they eat of the bread and drink from the cup”* (I Corinthians 11:28 NIV). The wrong turn that I know I have made and probably will continue to make at times is to mentally re-write this passage into “It’s my responsibility to examine other people and make sure they’re worthy.” And the very similar wrong turn that you and I sometimes make – and as our list of examples shows, others make as well – is to see Jesus’ words about vines and pruning as primarily about judgment and punishment. For, as I said last week, we perk up when we hear about someone else being judged, being excluded, being denied; when lines are drawn and some people are on the “right” side and some people are on the “wrong” side. We all do it don’t we? If we weren’t already prone to that sin then neither MSNBC nor Fox News, neither the Daily Kos nor

Rush Limbaugh, would have any reason to exist, for all of them play to our secret desire to judge other people as wanting, as wrong, as evil, even.

But my friends, ***that is not what this passage is about.*** Instead of reading this passage as a statement about judgment, read it as if it about just how tenderly God loves you. Read it and imagine the very best gardener you know and how he or she goes about their gardening. I'm going to quote Barbara Blaisdell again this week, both because she does like her vegetables and because she therefore indeed knows something about the joy and pain of gardening; listen to her words about what it's like to prune your garden:

...if you've ever grown roses or planted an apple tree, you know how it hurts to cut back all that growth. You plant and immediately prune. Then you patiently watch the little tree grow and grow. Then comes [the right time] and the gardening manual tells you to prune back all but 4 or 5 branches, and then even to cut those back again as well. And you ***wince*** when you're done-because the tree looks half the size that it once did. But come May, new growth begins and blossoms set on and by fall, if the tree is old enough, there is a glorious harvest of fruit.<sup>7</sup>

*"A glorious harvest of fruit."* What if we read today's scripture not as if it were primarily about judgment of those "other people," but about God's desire that you I indeed live lives that are blessed with a "glorious harvest of fruit"? What if we read Jesus' words to be a testimony to the way that God loves us and nurtures us, instead of, in Evans' words, about how, on pain of impending hell, we "have to get God right"?

Well, it would mean that God indeed lovingly tends us, feeds us, nurtures us, and winces when there are things about our lives that need pruning on our way to

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<sup>7</sup>Rev. Barbara S. Blaisdell, "The Fruit of the Vine," a sermon preached at First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), Concord, California, November 19, 2000. Emphasis mine. I am very grateful for how this sermon helped inspire today's sermon.

becoming the purposive and grace-filled people God wants us to be. Pruning then becomes not a gesture of judgment but a harbinger of hope. Putting “on the fire” those things that will make growth less possible, less lovely, is not an act of anger but a commitment to the future being better than the past. For after all, God knows that there are things about each one of our lives that need “pruning,” things that will ultimately diminish our chances for the best life we can have:

- Those old resentments we carry around and can’t seem to help but to nurse and feed and water need to be pruned, to be lopped off, to be cast into the fire so that new life, new growth can happen.
- Those fears we have about those who are “different” need to be pruned, to be lopped off, to be cast into the fire so that new life, new growth can happen.
- Those secret shames we carry and which visit us in the middle of the night need to be pruned, to be lopped off, to be cast into the fire so that new life, new growth can happen.
- Those regrets over what might have been, that guilt over what we did but should not have or what we didn’t do but should have, that keep us looking backward with pain instead of forward with hope, need to be pruned, to be lopped off, to be cast into the fire so that new life, new growth can happen.

At the very end of our passage for today, Jesus tells us what he wants for our lives. This time let me cite it as the NRSV translates it: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Joy. That’s the reason that God through Jesus Christ loves us, feeds us, nurtures us, keeps us connected to the vine that truly makes for abundant life, and prunes what keeps us from such joy. Our friends across town at Compassion International wrote these words: “The

difference between joy and happiness is that happiness happens to us and joy is a choice one makes.... [Joy] an attitude of the heart and spirit, present inside of us as an untapped reservoir of potential.... Joy requires a connection.”<sup>8</sup> My friends, this morning Jesus is inviting you to make the choice to indeed be ever more connected to the Vine of Life that He is, ever more connected to the One who wants for each one of us a “life [of] abundant fruit-filled branches... to offer this thirsty world,”<sup>9</sup> the One whose joy is indeed complete when we abide in him and share that good news with a hurting and hungry world. For such an opportunity, for such good news, for such a Savior, for such joy, oh yes, for such joy, thanks be to God! Amen.

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<sup>8</sup>[http://www.compassion.com/sponsor\\_a\\_child/difference-between-joy-and-happiness.htm](http://www.compassion.com/sponsor_a_child/difference-between-joy-and-happiness.htm)

<sup>9</sup>Blaisdell, Ibid.