

May 3, Fifth Sunday of Easter: John 15:1-8

The more I read the beginning of John 15, the more I come to believe that it is about the Lord's Supper.

by [Susan Palo Cherwien](#) in the [April 29, 2015](#) issue

Among Orthodox Christians only three saints are designated as “theologian,” and one of them is St. John the Evangelist. A quick reading of merely the opening verses of John's Gospel suffices for us to see and believe how different this writing is from the synoptics. If you are preparing a sermon on this text, sit down and read the whole Gospel of John again. If you are preparing to hear this text in worship, sit down and read the whole Gospel of John again. John the Theologian has more in mind than an accounting of the earthly days and the daily acts of the Word made flesh.

And the more I look at this specific text in chapter 15, contemplate its placement in John's Gospel, and analyze the structure of John's writing, the more I come to believe that this key text is associated with the Lord's Supper—and with the community gathered around Christ. John wants to impart how Christ, the Word made flesh, is going to continue to act in the world since the death, resurrection, and leave-taking of Christ.

Jesus' statement in verse 5 is one of the “I am”—*ego eimi*—pronouncements unique to John's Gospel. In chapter 6, after the feeding of the 5,000 near Capernaum, Jesus declares, “I am the bread of life.” Now, in chapter 15 in Jerusalem, after the supper and the washing of the disciples' feet, Jesus declares, “I am the true vine.” In chapter 6, Jesus continues: “Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.” Then to chapter 15 again: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love.”

I am the bread of life; abide in me, and I in you. I am the true vine; abide in me, and I in you. The “you” in these passages is plural. Perhaps we would say that this is obvious, but we often tend to read scripture from a very personal, individualistic viewpoint.

Christ Jesus is here talking about community. Jesus has fed the 5,000 people: “I am the bread of life.” Jesus has washed the disciples’ feet and given a new commandment, to love one another: “I am the true vine.” Jesus is addressing the eleven disciples; John seems to be addressing the worshiping community of the young church. Through tradition and the history of the church, we sense it as being addressed to us. The “you” is plural.

The Word has been made flesh in Jesus the Christ. Now the Word will be made flesh through those who gather around Christ in the meal, in the community of believers.

There is no mistaking this: Christ is the true grapevine—*ampelos* in Greek—and we are the *klemata*, the climbing, twining branches. Not just some generic vining plant but *vitis vinifera*, the fruiting grapevine that produces wine. *Vitis*, the botanical name for grape, is etymologically related to the word *vita*, life. I am the true vine; you are the branches.

Grapes have been cultivated in the Near East for over 7,000 years, back to the Neolithic period. The oldest known winery, found at Vayots Dzor in Armenia, dates from 4,000 years ago. And the Sumerian character for life was a grape leaf. I am the true grapevine. I am the Tree of Life.

You are the branches. The power of love and abundant life that flows from God into Christ flows also into the community that gathers around Christ and partakes of Christ. Who can tell exactly where the vine stops and the branches begin? To what loving energy does the community have access through this deep and abiding connection?

Through this connection to the vine of life, the community is filled with the creative, loving, and merciful energy of God, that same love that flowed through Christ. And because of this creative and loving connection, we will bear fruit. Christly fruit; godly fruit.

Mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that a plum brings forth plums not by an act of will but because it is its nature to do so. So the worshiping community—gathered around Christ, partaking of Christ, allowing the being of Christ to flow unimpeded into all the branches—produces what it, by its nature, must: godly fruit of compassion, loving-kindness, mercy, patience, wisdom, love.

Just under the outer bark of the vine and the branches are two layers necessary for the survival of the plant: the xylem and the phloem. The xylem carries water and nutrients up from the roots, through the vine, into the branches and the leaves. The phloem carries sugars, the products of photosynthesis, down from the leaves, through the branches, through the vine, to the roots. It is a reciprocal arrangement of survival, nourishment, and fruit-bearing.

The branches lift their leaves up into the sunlight and into the air; the vine digs its roots deep into the earth and down into water. Nourished by the vine, by water and the earth, the leaves raise their faces to the sun and the branches produce Christly, godly fruit. They do this on behalf of the vine; it's a mutual exchange.

So the worshipping community gathered around Christ is nourished by Christ. It is the very energy of God that flows through the community. (*I in them, and you in me. . . . Abide in my love.*) And the branches, thus nourished, produce fruit. Fruit for the life of the world, for the ongoing becoming of the universe, for the becoming of human community. That the Word made flesh in Christ may again be made flesh in the world.

Christ is the true grapevine. We are the branches. We are to bear fruit according to our nature, which is God's love incarnate in Christ, offered for the life of the world.