

**SCRIPTURE TEXT:** John 15:1-8  
**SERMON TITLE:** “The True Vine”

A man named Aristides once described the followers of Jesus Christ to the Roman emperor Hadrian in this way: *They love one another. They never fail to help widows; they save orphans from those who would hurt them. If they have something they give freely to the man who has nothing; if they see a stranger, they take him home, and are happy, as though he were a real brother.*<sup>1</sup> So I wonder: How is it that a community of disciples comes to love like this?

On July 4, 1965, at the Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, GA, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke these words: *To our most bitter opponents we say, “Throw us in jail and we will still love you. Bomb our houses and threaten our children and we will still love you. Beat us and leave us half dead and we will still love you. But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer. One day we shall so appeal to your heart and conscience that we shall win you in the process.”*<sup>2</sup> So I wonder: How is it that a community of disciples comes to love like this?

The priest of a Christian church in Iraq *tells the true story of a woman whose son and husband were killed by a police officer.* When the police officer was caught, he was placed on trial and he was convicted of the crime. As the judge considered his sentence, this is what the woman said: *“He took my family away from me, and I still have a lot of love to give, and he needs to know what love and grace feel like—so I think he should have to come to visit my home in the slums, twice a month, and spend time with me, so that I can be a mother to him,*

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Wallis, Jim. *The Call to Conversion*. San Francisco: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1973, 14.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted in Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, 276.

*so that I can embrace him, and he can know that my forgiveness is real.”*<sup>3</sup> So I wonder: How is it that an individual disciple of Jesus Christ comes to love like this?

Well, Jesus shows us the way. He paints a word picture for us: *I am the true vine....you are the branches...those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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.*

In the very next verse, the primary commandment becomes crystal clear: *This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

Jesus is talking here, not just to individual disciples, but to the community of his followers, for the word *you* in this text is almost always plural. Jesus is talking about the fruit of love born by the church. William Barclay writes: *Love is the binding power which holds the whole Christian body together. The tendency of any body of people is sooner or later to fly apart; and love is the one bond that will hold them together in unbreakable fellowship.*<sup>4</sup>

Now my brothers and sisters, there are many ways to measure the effectiveness of a church. For example, this is the 2007 Journal of the Southwest Texas Conference of The United Methodist Church—the conference to which this congregation belongs. Within this book are 53 pages of statistics in small print covering all 350 churches of the Southwest Texas Conference. The statistics measure worship attendance, Sunday School attendance, membership, size of budget, number of small groups, staff salaries, and on and on it goes. In many ways, the statistics are used to measure the effectiveness of congregations within our conference.

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<sup>3</sup> Claiborne, Shane. *The Irresistible Revolution: Living as an Ordinary Radical*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006, 277.

<sup>4</sup> Quoted in Stephens, The Rev. Dr. Wiley. "Well-Connected Christians - Bearing Fruit in the Community of Faith - Dr. Wiley Stephens - Day1.org [Print View]." *Sermons, Preaching and Christian Community | Welcome to Day1*. 11 May 2009 <[http://day1.org/990-wellconnected\\_christians.print](http://day1.org/990-wellconnected_christians.print)>.

But do you see what these statistics don't measure—at least directly? They don't measure how well we love. They don't measure our *fruit production*, if you will. And how well we love is the measure of discipleship Jesus recommends.

So where does this kind of love come from? Well, it comes from the Father. In fact, do you remember what 1 John says about God? 1 John says that God is love. Therefore, love has its source in God and it flows through Jesus Christ to his followers, and through his followers to one another. The vine nourishes the branches and the branches bear fruit.

And make no mistake about it, to love like this is not a matter of trying harder—or creating a new program—or launching a new Bible study. To love like this is a matter of abiding in Christ—of staying connected to him—of living with him in such an intimate relationship that our desires are so in tune with Christ that whatever we ask will be done for us.

And when we abide in Christ, his words live in us—and we love. And by the way, where is the best fruit found? The best fruit is found closest to the vine, *where the nutrients are the most concentrated*.<sup>5</sup> So the nearer we are to Christ, the more we love.

But apart from the vine, we can do nothing. My brothers and sisters, we're not made to go it alone—to trust in our own strength. Apart from the vine, we can't bear the fruit of love and if we can't bear this fruit—we shrivel up—we wither on the vine—and about the only thing we're fit for is the burn pile.

But even when we do bear fruit, pruning is required. No matter how well we love, there is always more fruit to be produced—and the way to increased fruit production is careful

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<sup>5</sup> Quoted in Huey, Kate. "Weekly Seeds." [I.ucc Home](http://i.ucc.org). 11 May 2009

<<http://i.ucc.org/DesktopModules/DnnForge%20-%20NewsArticles/Print.aspx?tabid=81&tabmodul>>.

pruning. And this is God's doing. God is vinegrower whose job it is to prune the vine to make the vine even more productive.

This means that if we as a church are ever going to love in the deep and radical ways I talked about earlier, pruning is required. We have to deal with our resistance—our self-centeredness—our cowardice—our fear.

And this pruning has to take place within us individually in the depth of our own souls because resistance is found there as well. And this pruning can be a painful process.

Walter Wink writes: *Once, during a particularly intense period of what is euphemistically called growth, but which feels closer to cooking in the fires of hell, I told my spiritual mentor that I couldn't stand it any more. She said, "Good, you're just where God wants you," and curtly turned away. I chased after her and told her in no uncertain terms that hers was not exactly a pastoral response. "Then write a dialogue with God," she [said].*

*I grabbed my notebook and immediately began writing a dialogue with God, who, in conscious imitation of my mentor, said, "Good, you're just where I want you." I continued to cook, and in retrospect can see how essential it was that the fires of purgatory smelted me this way. No one would voluntarily enter these fires; God had, as it were, ambushed me, and I simply had to ride it out.*

*I realized later that I was free to abort the process at any point. Something in me stayed with the process simply because God was in it.*

Wink concluded that *This pruning business can get a lot more painful than anything I've ever known.* But when the branches are pruned—they can be used to build the inferno in

which we can be cooked, and cleansed, and slowly shaped into human beings<sup>6</sup> who love deeply and radically—just like God.

So my brothers and sisters, I ask you: Where do we need pruning? How will we abide in the Christ, the true vine? What kind of fruit will we bear?

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<sup>6</sup> Wink, Walter. "Abiding, even under the knife - John 15:1-8 - Living by the Word - Column | Christian Century | Find Articles at BNET." [Find Articles at BNET | News Articles, Magazine Back Issues & Reference Articles on All Topics](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n13_v111/ai_15177815/). 11 May 2009  
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