

When you think of fine wine, your mind and palate might wander to a particular region of France. The French have a long history of vintage winemaking and have provided the names for most of the well-known varieties of vino we are accustomed to. Champagne, Bordeaux, Chardonnay, Burgundy, just to name a few, are all regions that give monikers to certain types of French wine that, in order to be authentic, must have originated in that region. The stuff that baseball players spray on each other after the World Series, for example, might be called champagne, but if the bottle indicates it came from anywhere other than a specific region in France, it's just "sparkling wine."

But while the French seem to be the quintessential wine snobs, more adventurous winemakers have *branched out*, so to speak. Leaving behind the conservative and highly regulated regions of their homeland, a number of French winemakers have moved to America's wine country around Napa, California, because, as Nicolas Morlet, who descends from a long line of champagne producers, declares: "It is completely different here. We have the freedom to fully realize our passion, to push our limits with every vintage, and we aren't working under a classification made in 1855."

Still, some things remain unchanged about winemaking. One foundational principle that applies to both Old World and New World wine is that great wine is always a reflection of a particular vineyard. I Repeat a Great wine is always a reflection of a particular vineyard. So if you want to pick a good wine, in other words, you have to know the source.

We can probably assume that Jesus knew a little about wine himself, since we often see him at parties in the gospels, and since he knew exactly what kind of wine would blow the minds of the guests at a wedding feast in Cana, when he performed his first miracle. So it shouldn't be a big surprise to us that he used the

metaphor of a vineyard to describe his relationship to his disciples — a discussion that appears in our Gospel this morning.

Jesus knew that the best way to tell what kind of product you were getting would be to look at the label to see where in the world it came from. In this case, the source isn't a place but a person — Jesus himself who begins his metaphor by saying that he is the “true vine,” the source of growth and fruit-bearing, in a vineyard that is tended by His Heavenly Father. Thus our Creator, God, is the real winemaker, the one who tends the vineyard and assures its quality.

As it turns out, the vineyard Jesus is talking about has a long and storied history. The metaphor of the vineyard is used several times in the Old Testament to describe God's relationship with Israel. In the book of Isaiah, for example, God plants and tends a vineyard but it yields “wild grapes” or inferior fruit — a metaphor for Israel and Judah's lack of repentance.

The same vineyard imagery is used in Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Hosea. In each of these cases, however, Israel is the “vine” and the ultimate source of poor “fruit.” In the Old Testament, “fruitfulness” was another way of saying “faithfulness,” thus a lack of good fruit meant that God's people had failed to be the true, nourishing vine that would bolster God's reputation in the world as the ultimate fine winemaker.

That being the case, it was the winemaker's job to do some pruning and replacing, which according to the prophets was what the exile was all about. Later, God would replant the vineyard with a new stock, and the new vine coming from it, the “true vine,” would be Jesus himself, who embodied the new Israel, God's Chosen One, the One through whom the whole world would be saved and blessed. But while the vine is the source for good fruit, there's a vital link between the vine and its fruit.

Thus the “branches” are the focus of Jesus’ teaching with his disciples. “I am the vine,” says Jesus to his followers, “you are the branches.” Notice that the disciples of Jesus aren’t the “fruit,” the end product, but the conduit for the vine’s nourishment. The quality of the fruit thus depends on the branches’ connectedness to the vine itself. What Jesus is describing here is the necessary interrelationship between himself and his disciples — a relationship characterized by indwelling and support.

Look closely at a grapevine, and one of the first things you notice about its branches is that it’s very difficult to tell them apart individually. All the branches twist and curl around one another, to the point that you can’t tell where one starts and another stops. Jesus’ use of branch imagery is thus a way of expressing that it’s not the achievement of an individual branch, or its status that matters. The quality of the branches ,and the fruit that comes from them, depends solely on the quality of their connectedness to the vine.

When it comes to discipleship, each “branch” is to work at giving up his or her desire for individual achievement, in order to become one of many encircling branches — a community that is rooted and nurtured by Christ, and a group of people that point to his reputation and quality, rather than their own. And with this understanding of branches in mind, there are a couple of things that we branches must remember, in order to stay effectively and fruitfully connected to Jesus.

First, we have to remember that branches are fruit-bearing, not fruit-making. As Jesus mentions, “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me ... Those who abide in me, and I in them, bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” We’ve heard these words of Jesus many times, but we also hear the call of a culture of workaholism, achievement, power, and success that can lure Disciples of Christ into thinking that we can be fruitful as a result of our own efforts! When a branch gets the idea that it

can make fruit, make wine, on its own, it dries up, withers, and is no longer useful. In other words, the mission of a branch isn't to look good, or to call attention to itself, but to give all the glory to God, the one whose name is on the label.

Second, the “fruit” that we are to bear, like the grapes of a fine winery, is full of many textures and flavors. Paul outlines some of these in his letter to the Galatians when he talks about the “fruits of the Spirit,” which are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” A more general way to talk about the “fruit” that we bear, however, might be to talk about grace. As branches, connected to and “abiding in” the source of God’s love and grace, we are conduits and not the end product. God’s grace and love always come to us on their way to someone else; someone who will be able to “taste and see that the Lord is good,” because we have been faithful branches.

But how do we best stay connected to the “true vine?” Thankfully there are a number of spiritual disciplines that can help deepen our relationship with Christ, which is where the whole idea of “pruning” comes in. We can attend weekly worship; where we are nourished by the body and blood of Jesus during communion. We can volunteer some of our time to help others in our community, or within our congregation. We can make sure we tithe a certain percentage of our income habitually, and not just when it is convenient. We mustn't forget that the branches that are carrying no fruit are removed, even the most fruitful branch needs to be pruned once and a while in order “to make it bear more fruit.”

In the vineyards of Jesus' day, grapevines grew naturally along the ground instead of being propped up on poles, or lattices, as they are today. The vinedresser would come along to lift and “clean” the vine, pruning away the excess and dead growth. Jesus uses the same imagery to describe the way the disciples themselves had been “cleansed by the word that he has spoken to them.” That “word” was the teaching and the commandments of Jesus; and the disciples' knowledge and

obedience to that “word” would help them “remain” or stay connected to his “love” — the nourishing flow from the vine.

Reading, meditating, and praying through the Scriptures is another way in which disciples are “pruned.” The words of Jesus about the Kingdom, and the story of his life, death and resurrection, help us focus on what’s truly important for bearing the fruit of his grace and love to the world. When we are focused on the “word of God,” we are able to cut out all the offshoots and tangents of temptation and sin that can choke out our great growth.

When the writer of Hebrews says that Scripture is “sharper than any two-edged sword,” he might have as easily said that Scripture was the ultimate set of pruning shears, trimming us for the life of discipleship we were meant to live. Such pruning can be painful as God uses it to lop off old habits, and cut away the growth of sin that we somehow think is attractive. But it’s absolutely necessary if we’re going to embrace our purpose as conduits of God’s grace.

Great wine is the reflection of a particular vineyard, be it from an Old World tradition, or an eclectic New World experiment. God wants to tend the finest vineyard ever, the one that takes the ultimate prize for great growth. May we, as disciples of Jesus, the true vine, embrace our role as his branches — channels for God’s grace, so that when the people of this world sample the fine vintage of God’s love and grace flowing through us, they will most definitely want to get to know the winemaker!