

Of Vines & Branches
by Suzanne Johnson

Good Morning Friends,

I'd like to read this morning from John 15, verses 1-17. These words were spoken by Jesus to his followers:

I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that one lay

down his life for his friends. You are my friends if you do what I command. I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last. Then the Father will give you whatever you ask in my name. This is my command: Love each other.

It's autumn in Ohio, and near the time for harvesting in our part of the world. One of my happy childhood memories was being able to pluck a bunch of purple grapes from the harbor where they grew near our smokehouse. I would take this luscious cluster of fruit to the pump and rinse them clean before enjoying their juicy sweet taste.

A few years ago I was fortunate enough to be able to go on a trip to Australia, and I asked the tour leader for a roommate to help defray the cost of my trip. That's how I met Karen, who lives near Niagara on the Lake in Ontario where she and her family own and operate a vineyard. I called Karen when I selected this passage of scripture to ask her more about her vineyard. They mainly raise grapes for a winery, but some of their grapes are used as a dessert or what is called an ice wine. Those grapes used for regular wine are harvested before it freezes, but those used for the ice wine are gathered just after they freeze. This means that timing is everything. The vines, for the most part, seem to take care of themselves; it is the branches which seem to require the expert care. If a freeze is predicted before the grapes are mature enough for harvest, wind propellers are used to keep the leaves warm so that the grapes can continue ripening. The analogy might be made that as we grow in being able to produce

good fruit, we need to have the gentle winds of the Spirit blow upon us: our prayer should be, “Breathe on us, Holy One.” Knowing how to produce the intended fruit always take careful listening to the Creator.

Karen remembers when they used to prune the branches after the harvest in the winter. They had to move the dead wood outside the vineyard to be burned. Now with modern machinery they are able to shred the dead or withered branches to make mulch which remains in the vineyard and adds nutrients to the soil. Is there possibly an analogy here for us today? The branches are not removed from the vineyard any longer, and they do not need to be burned. Nothing is totally lost. The seemingly dead branches have their place as they are ground up and used to enrich the soil with their nutrients. This reminds me that today we should not give up on each other or anyone. In the Bible we read about demons being cast out of people. Not much was known about mental health back then, and we are still learning and revising our understanding of it today. As Quakers we believe that there is that of God; there is that Light; there is that Love—within everyone just waiting to be awakened. Our love for those who seem to be outside the fold calls us to be there for them—really, really—LOVE.

In today’s scripture we’ve seen that we are admonished to remain in the vine—to remain attached. The vine is the source from which we, the branches, draw our nourishment and are thus able to bear good fruits. Jesus even used the drinking of wine as a symbol of communion. The meaning behind the symbol is worthy of our attention as Quakers although we don’t practice the ritual. Our spiritual lives are dependent on being connected with the Holy, and as a result,

we have this communion with others connected to the same Vine, and in a way, with everyone.

As Jesus tells his disciples to love one another, he knows as they gather in the stuffy, crowded room that he has only a few more hours to prepare his disciples for the tumult, or crisis, which lies ahead. Outside the city of Jerusalem where they are meeting are vineyards covering the hills. Most likely, Jesus and his disciples have walked through them on their way to meet together. He is about to leave his closest friends in the world, and he foresees that they will face trials on his behalf and without his physical presence to protect them. Reading these ancient words today from the book of John we see that his point is still applicable for us as we have gathered in this meeting room. Jesus uses specifically two images from those vineyards in the scriptures we have just read.

The first image is the grapes themselves. Jesus says that one thing is essential: in order to bear fruit in our lives we must remain in connection with the Vine. A branch is not separated from the Vine by any distance. We're referring to an INTIMATE connection. The life of the branch is dependent on the Vine. The spiritual fruit from the living vine is different, also, from that consumed from earthly vineyards in that it is lasting, or eternal. It remains alive as we love each other. God can touch our lives in such a powerful way that our love never dies. It takes form in our hearts, and then in the hearts of those around us. It's contagious. Some of you grew up in families with more love than others of us. Love can somehow often even be passed down from generation to generation to generation. It is the strongest force in the world!

Some of us older members at Cincinnati Friends Meeting have lived through several transitions. Some of you were here when the Meetinghouse was moved from downtown to this location. Some of us remember many of the ministers who have come and gone. But the Vine has remained the same. Without Spirit our meeting would not continue to live on. My friend, Karen, in Ontario, told me that the branches in her vineyard grow three layers high with two vines in each layer. We are all branches in this spiritual analogy. We are all in the same vineyard of life. If we lose our connection to the Vine which represents the supreme Love and Truth of our spiritual lives, we need to be pruned. Without an intimate connection with our Maker we lose our sweetness, our ability to love and forgive. Without a direct connection to our Creator we might harbor grudges and make idols of ourselves, or others, or even things, which in turn can destroy us. Egos can try to replace the Vine.

Many good things are happening at Cincinnati Friends Meeting. Of course it has not been a perfectly smooth road, but we refuse to look back as we all learn how to love each other more. We have new people entering our doors. Change does not come easy to everyone, young or old, and particularly to those of us who like to keep things the same. We need to be tender with one another as we love each other, because pruning can be painful without the wisdom of the one who created us. We need to find innovative ways to help bring about the changes necessary in our Meeting so that we may remain in the Vine. We do have a choice, but the commandment is to love one another. When I see people giving so willingly of themselves to serve in our Meeting, I know that we are opening our arms in the name of love.

There is a second image quite different from the fruit, or the grapes, of the Vine. This second image is that of the branches. A good vineyard needs a lot of hard work and care. As the branches, we need to care for one another and help each other during the good times as well as during the difficult times of our lives. My loving of you means accepting you, your weaknesses and your strengths without trying to change you. Let's not hide our weaknesses from one another. That which we bury within ourselves can destroy us. That which we share is meant to bring about intimacy and bind us together so that we can be good, healthy branches bearing good fruit.

As Quakers we believe in the inner experience of the Holy. We believe God shows no preferences. Each and every one of us is as precious as the other. While living in these human bodies, we can only aspire to be becoming all that God wants us to be. Hopefully, we can look at this as a challenge, and in no way as overwhelming. We are on our way to becoming all that we can be for the Holy.

Some days I feel that my cup is half empty, and other days it is half full. A wise friend told me many years ago that you cannot live on feelings, but that can be quite hard to avoid, especially if we make ourselves vulnerable to each other and take the risks needed for growth. Who among us can go through the pain of illness or the challenges we're facing in our economy without hurting?! Emotions ebb and flow. I'd like to encourage everyone in our meeting to know that through loving each other we can be branches which bear good fruit. We are cups more than half full. We can be cups running over with love if we remain in the Vine.

In closing there is a poem by Michael Rew in your bulletin which I'd like to read:

"Revival of Love"

We set our hands to plowing, but looked back
and were not fit to work the Master's field.
But when we prayed and turned, the land was healed.
Now we shall work again and not be slack,
and God shall bless us till we cannot stack
the sheaves we bring rejoicing from the yield
God pours from heaven once we have appealed
His mercy in our brokenness and lack.
It is a burden light, and easy yoke,
to go forth weeping, bearing precious seed,
and sow it in the fallow ground we broke
and watch with prayer so neither thorn nor weed
can spring up in a bitter root to choke
revival of the love we sorely need.