

SERMON TITLE: "I Am the Vine"
SERMON TEXT: John 15:1-12
PREACHER: Rev. Kim James
OCCASION: March 10, 2024 (Girl Scout Sunday) at First United Methodist Church

INTRODUCTION

I'm so glad that our church's Girl Scout troop is able to be here in worship with us today. Throughout United Methodism, the second Sunday of March is celebrated as Girl Scout Sunday. That's because this is the week in 1912 when founder Juliette Gordon Low registered the first Girl Scouts in Savannah, Georgia. After that, Girl Scouts grew into an international organization called the World Association of Girl Scouts and Girl Guides. Girl Scouts USA has 112 councils and 236,000 troops.

When I joined Brownies in the second grade, I was one of several in my class. I remember this because I have a class photo in which we happened to be wearing our Brownie dresses that day. Later, we grew into our green Junior Girl Scout dresses with our sashes and sewed-on badges. I know the dress code is different these days, but Girl Scouts still sell wonderful cookies to support scout camps and other activities. I read a news article that indicated that Girl Scouts USA is "the largest girl-led entrepreneurial program in the world." "With nearly 700,000 Girl Scouts participating," the organization sells about 200 million boxes of cookies every year.*

Obviously, I'm telling you all this about Girl Scouts as a way to welcome the girls, their leaders, and family members among us today. We're glad you're here! And we're looking forward to buying and eating your cookies. But I'm also telling you about the vast network of Girl Scouts for another reason too.

Since the beginning of Lent—the season of 40 days plus six Sundays before Easter—I've been preaching a sermon series on the "I am" statements of Jesus in the Gospel according to John.

So far, we've thought about what Jesus meant when he said: "I am the light of the world," "I am the good shepherd," and "I am the bread of life." Today, in our scripture reading from John 15, we've heard another "I am" statement. So I invite you to think with me about this. What did Jesus mean by using the metaphor "I am the vine"?

1—WE ARE PART OF SOMETHING BIGGER THAN OURSELVES

The first and most obvious meaning of "I am the vine" is that we are part of something bigger than ourselves. Jesus indicated not only that he was the vine, but that we are the branches, and that God is the vine grower. In other words, we're all in this together. We're connected to one another, to Jesus, and to God. Like the very large and efficient Girl Scout organization, we're a giant network that is grown and cared for by God. Jesus isn't alone, and neither are we.

Jesus used the image of a vine, probably a grapevine, because it was something natural and familiar to his disciples and other listeners. Other images of togetherness might be more familiar to us. This past week I flew to Chicago for a church-related meeting. When my original flight failed to take off from the Salt Lake airport because of flooding from the overflow of a lavatory toilet, and we had to wait 2.5 hours for a new airplane, I got to thinking about what a huge network United Airlines is. It isn't just one airplane flying to one city. Goodness no! Even after many passengers had rescheduled flights and headed off in other directions, when the rest of us finally boarded a new airplane, the flight attendant mentioned that there were still 105 different connecting flights affected by our delay. That was the bad news. The good news was that, in such a large airline company, they had many smart people and an incredible computer network rapidly solving the problems.

In our Christian faith and in our lives, things don't always go as smoothly as we might hope. But it's good to know that we aren't expected to do everything on our own. We travelers didn't have

to flap our arms and try to fly to Chicago, each one of us on our own. United Airlines did get us there. Likewise, as branches of Jesus' vine, we are part of something much bigger than ourselves.

2—THE VINE NETWORK OFFERS IMPORTANT BENEFITS

So, as we can see, there are some important benefits to being part of this vine which is bigger than ourselves. When Jesus said, "I am the vine" he was indicating that he and God are a valuable place for us to belong. The song that Larry sang for us this morning was beautiful musically and also because of what the lyrics said. God's voice is calling to us by name and choosing us. In times of fear and hopelessness, in times of shame and blindness, God offers to heal our pain. The vine of Jesus is important because, in it, we hear Jesus' voice saying, "I love you, and you are mine."

Belonging to the vine also gives us clarity of purpose. If we don't know what our role in life is, all we have to do is follow Jesus' instruction. In John 15:12, Jesus said, "This is my commandment, that you love one another." Not only do we know *to whom* we belong, but we also know *how* we belong. We abide in the love that Jesus has shown. We practice that love with one another.

Knowing human nature and the conflicts that are inherent in our relationships, we might wonder sometimes how it's possible to love one another. But, if Jesus is the vine, and we are the vine's branches, then we receive our life and nutrients through Jesus. In an actual vine, those nutrients would be water, oxygen, and minerals that travel through the plant's vascular system. In our spiritual connection to Jesus, we receive nutrients through regular Bible reading, prayer, and worship. Jesus could say "I am the vine," because he abided in God. He lived in God, and God lived in him. When we abide in Jesus the vine through our spiritual disciplines, then we abide in God too, and God's love infuses all that we say and do.

Of course, even when we're trying to do everything right, even when we're trying to stay close to Jesus and abide in God's love, we sometimes miss the mark. And that's when God comes to us in love with some divine pruning shears. Not as an act of punishment, but as an act of love, God prunes off what is unproductive in our lives. When Jesus said, "I am the vine," he wanted us to understand that sometimes God will need to clear away our rough edges and sinful sprouts so that more and better fruit can grow.

3—WHAT FRUIT DOES THE VINE BEAR?

And that, then, leads us to a third point that Jesus intended when he said, "I am the vine." Jesus wants us to bear much fruit. As a vine with branches, Jesus could have been talking about grapes growing on a grapevine. But we can easily see that Jesus used the word "fruit" to mean the qualities and characteristics of our human lives. In verses 9-12, Jesus speaks of the fruit of love, and in verse 11, Jesus speaks of the fruit of joy.

Many of us are familiar with the Apostle Paul's list of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22 and 23. There we read, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

That list of spiritual fruit is very similar to the characteristics upheld in the Girl Scout Law that we recited earlier in this worship service. There we see a commitment to be honest and fair, friendly and helpful, considerate and caring, courageous and strong, responsible, respectful, and wise. When we hear Jesus say, "I am the vine," and we accept our places as branches on that vine, we dedicate ourselves to growing this kind of fruit that makes the world a better place, where everyone is a sister and brother to each other.

CONCLUSION

Yesterday afternoon, our church hosted a Girl Scout Tea. The girls were from a different troop than the one that usually meets in our building. Actually, they were from several different troops. It was a networking thing. Mary Heslop, who oversees several troops that include the troop at our church, knows someone who oversees several other troops, and Mary connected them to us as a place that could possibly host their Girl Scout Tea. Of course, we said, “Yes!” It was fun for me to see the lovely table decorations and observe how the girls were learning about how to put on a little tea party, invite friends, and be sociable. They were learning proper table etiquette, so they could enjoy one another’s company.

Being a part of something bigger than ourselves is important and valuable. It helps us feel a sense of belonging and know how to do that with a clarity of purpose. When we connect to the vine through regular participation and use of provided resources, and when we allow the vine grower to prune off what’s unproductive, then we’re able to bear some amazing fruit. Are we talking about Girl Scouts? Yes, by all means! Are we also talking about living a Christian life? Yes, we are!

When Jesus said, “I am the vine,” he was obviously describing himself. He wanted his followers to understand that he himself was being grown and cared for by God the vine grower. In that same way, when we abide in Jesus the vine, we branches are then able to grow in a life of fruitfulness. When we branches stay connected through daily devotional Bible reading, prayer, and faithful worship, we gain the nutrients we need. Sometimes requiring a pruning clip here or there, but always nourished by God’s loving care, we have the ability to produce love, joy, and all the other fruits of the spirit. That’s what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the vine.”

*https://www.npr.org/2024/02/29/1234163657/girl-scout-cookies-thin-mints-how-it-works?utm_source=npr_newsletter&utm_medium=email&utm_content=20240302&utm_term=9310747&utm_campaign=news&utm_id=51833200&orgid=213&utm_att1=