In 312, the Roman Emperor, Constantine, embraced Christianity as a part of the Roman pantheon of gods and goddesses. About a decade later he called the first Christian council together at Nicaea to determine the "right" Christian doctrine—or more to the point, to identify "wrong" doctrine so the church could control who's in and who's out. The result was the Nicene Creed. There followed the Apostles' Creed in 341, The Chalcedonian Creed in 451, The Augsburg Confession in 1530, and that's just scratching the surface of the ways Christians have tried to nail down the 'right' doctrine as a test of inclusion.

Thomas and Alexander Campbell believed the creeds replaced Christ and helped to create and maintain division among Christians. The creeds had some value for teaching, but should not be inflicted as "tests of fellowship." A foundational principle of the Restoration Movement that incubated the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) is "No creed but Christ."

The Campbells offered a faith based, not on beliefs *about* Jesus, but on intentional efforts to *imitate* Jesus' life of sacrificial love and service as witnessed in the Gospels. It is that *effort* that is the difference between belief and faith.

At this table we acknowledge the standard by which we measure our own faith: the broken body and spilled blood of Jesus. Dare we intend to follow?

Our Communion Hymn is #409 "I Hunger and I Thirst".

Pastoral Prayer

Our Father, Heavenly Vinedresser, thank you for creating us in your image, with abilities to create and manage human communities of love and mutual support. Thank you for the gifts of thought and reason, and forgive us when we fail to engage those gifts and engage instead our subhuman impulses of self-gratification.

Thank you for the ability to communicate through symbols and metaphors; for the ability to know Jesus as our true vine and ourselves as branches, drawing life and nourishment from his presence and cooperating with each other to bear fruit of his Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Help us to remain connected to him; prune us and feed us, so that we may bear good fruit in his name. Keep us abiding in him, Lord, and guide our steps to live lives that reflect and imitate his life of selfless love. Amen.

JOHN 15:1-12 (NRSVUE) ***"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.***
The Word of God for the people of God!

The word, "abide," seems important. Eleven times it's used in these twelve verses. Given the vine and branches metaphor, "attached" seems an appropriate simile. Jesus talks about "pruning" each branch that bears fruit, and says, ***"You have already been cleansed by the word*** [logos—"In the beginning was the word—the logos"] ***"You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.*** "Cleansed. Pruned." It's the same word—the root of the English "catharsis."

In John 13, when Jesus washes the disciples' feet, there's an interesting exchange between Jesus and Simon Peter:

> ***Peter said to him, "You will never wash my feet." Jesus answered, "Unless I wash you, you have no share with me." 9Simon Peter said to him, "Lord, not my feet only but also my hands and my head!" 10 Jesus said to him, "One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the feet, but is entirely clean.*** [same word] ***And you [***plural***] are clean..."***

You are cleansed. You are pruned.

We bought our house in 2007. The previous owners were Master Gardeners, and the yard was what attracted me to the house. Fifty azaleas and fourteen roses of several varieties. At age 65, I waded in and loved every minute working in that yard. But, from September of 2007, when we closed on the house, through May of 2016, for 78 of those 105 months I was away doing interim ministries while the yard kept growing. Each time I returned I was a little older, a little slower, with a little less stamina, and a little further behind in the yard. I never really caught back up.

Over the eighteen years we've lived there we've lost some of the roses, because, at first, I didn't know how to prune them or care for them, and those that survived became rather scrawny. But I learned when and where to cut, and the pruned cane will divide and produce two canes—sometimes three—each of which will bloom. The plant spreads and thrives because the pruned canes stay attached to the vine; they "abide."

The word in the original language is μεινατε, the imperative of "to stay" or "to

remain." Verse 4 opens, literally, "Remain in me and I in you, just as I am in you."

One can push a metaphor too far and get lost in the symbolism—assigning specific roles to specific people: Jesus is the Vine, the Father is the Vinedresser, the disciples are the Branches, the Fruit is the result of their ministry. We can transfer those roles to us... But a more useful lessons may point out the relationship between dependence and interdependence, connectedness and unity, growth and productivity.

The dots can be connected in so many ways when we pull together John's seven "I am" statements of Jesus. It's so important for us to see biblical books—the gospels and epistles, the prophetic and wisdom writings of the Hebrew Scriptures—not as inspired and inspirational sound bites and memory verses... Inspired, yes; but complete works with literary value and methods. This "I am" theme, like the "Logos" theme, runs throughout John's gospel; hooks that hold the message—the good news—together.

Only in John does Jesus speak of himself in this distinctive 'I am' way: "I am the bread of life"; "Light of the World"; "Door for the sheep"; "Good Shepherd"; "Resurrection and Life"; "Way, Truth, Life"; and today's final statement: "I am the true vine."

Each is a Jewish metaphor for God and God's people, sometimes for Israel and its leaders, including God as their ultimate leader. Like Paul's image of the church as the body of Christ (one body with many parts), the metaphor of vine and branches is organic. Membership in the people of God is not names on a list, but a living organism: branches of a living vine. As Christ is the whole body in Paul's image, so Christ is the whole vine in John's. Christ is not the stem or trunk, to which branches are attached, but is the vine, into which believers are incorporated. For the Johannine Jesus this is the whole point of the Farewell Discourses: Jesus has not "established the church" and left it behind to "carry on his work." The "I am" statements take his presence to a different level; a word play on the name of God... a reinforcement of I and the Father are one; God/Christ/Holy Spirit—The Way, the Truth, and the Life—continues in, with, and as the church in its journey through history.[1]

And it is with this final 'I am' statement that Jesus draws his disciples into the metaphor: "you are the branches.,"And then he adds that bit about pruning. It's one thing to remove unproductive branches; but those that are productive are not congratulated or left alone. They're "pruned" so they will bear more fruit.

I keep coming back to that word, "abide." "Abide in me." "Remain in me." That statement is the death of purely individualistic Christianity—"Me and Jesus, all alone."

Our culture increasingly obsesses over individualism and privacy; individuals or groups getting off in a corner by themselves and developing opinions to which they cling and demand compliance, even when those opinions defy concrete evidence. Groups

[1] Craddock, Fred B.; Boring, M. Eugene Boring. *The People's New Testament Commentary* (p. 340). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

become divisive and focus on differences and disagreements more than on points of agreement. They become increasingly belligerent toward any individual or group that will not comply with its ideology. The result is a growing sense of social isolation and alienation and distrust because there is no common vine in which we all abide.

Even the one who said, "I *am* the vine" has become a point of contention between those who claim to follow him. Different groups focus on their own sectarian *beliefs about* him rather than focusing directly on the witness of his life and ministry and trying to imitate that life and ministry. Divided and belligerent individuals and groups are indicting evidence of separation from the vine.

The most commonly documented psychiatric problem in America is anxiety disorders that produce depression and low self-esteem. In 2022, Arkansas had the second highest opioid prescription rate in the nation: 72.2 prescriptions per 100 persons. The national average was 46.8 per 100.[2] A primary factor behind it all is social isolation.

Diagnosis and treatment for these disorders is notably lower among persons with significant group identity and participation, and Christians who regularly participate in a church evidencing some of the lowest rates. Interestingly, Christians from evangelical and conservative groups register higher rates of anxiety and depression than their mainline and progressive counterparts; and persons affiliated with Christian Nationalism register the highest rates among identifiable Christian groups.[3]

Abiding in the vine is crucial to spiritual and mental health and to social stability (and the three are closely intertwined); but groups that tend to create or become their own vine reflect higher rates of mental, social, and spiritual disorder.

The Johannine Jesus understands discipleship as the process of incorporating the believer into the Christian community. Individual branches have life-giving connection, not only in a personal relationship with Christ, but in relation to all the other branches that make up the vine of which Jesus says, "I am." To be connected with Christ is to be organically related to his church.[4] And all that is the setup. Listen to the closing comment that seals the deal: ***"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."*** Where is there room in that for division? What is difficult to understand?

There's an old story about a new minister who began calling in his new parish. The members warned him to stay away from old man Colson. He'd been a strong leader in the congregation, but grew bitter after the death of his wife. For almost a decade he had been a recluse and didn't welcome company. Previous ministers gave up on him.

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[2] https://humanservices.arkansas.gov/wp-content/uploads/SOR-Attachment-9.pdf

[3] https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8716501/#:~:text=Research%20has%20shown%20that%20Evangelical,Avent%20et%20al.

[4] Ibid.

Not one to avoid a challenge, the new minister called on old man Colson one chilly November evening and introduced himself. The old man let him in and motioned for him to sit in one of two rocking chairs in front of the fireplace. For several minutes they sat in silence; rocking and watching the flames dancing in the fireplace.

After a while, the minister took the poker and dragged a live coal out onto the hearth. In silence, they watched the coal fade and cool until it was a dull gray. The minister then pushed the coal back up to the edge of the bed of coals, where it again began to glow brightly. Then he stood, shook the old man's hand and left.

The next Sunday morning, old man Colson was in church, and wept as the people embraced him and welcomed him home. The branch had reconnected to the vine.

[Prayer Slide]