



Loved to the End

The Fifth Week of Lent

I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

John 15:5

I've observed a bit about grapes since moving to Italy. In the winter the branches are pruned back to the thick, hearty vine, which spends much of the year looking like a gnarled post. In the summer, thin branches begin to grow out of the vine, straight and strong, and reach remarkable lengths.

The branches are supple, and their flexibility makes them perfect for creating decorative wreaths. Once cut from the vine, the branches can be twisted, braided, and decorated with pretty much anything. From flowers to herbs to Christmas baubles, anything can be woven in or glued onto a grapevine wreath to make a beautiful display.



The thing about these branches, though, is that decorations have to be attached to the wreath because the branches don't produce anything useful on their own. They are only good for display. They may be beautiful, but branches separated from the vine are not serving the purpose for which they were created. They aren't producing fruit.

It's easy to want a lovely, static display. You can make a grapevine wreath in an afternoon (or buy one in an hour). Then you can hang it up and let it look pretty, and you don't have to think about it again. Producing grapes, on the other hand, requires work. It requires careful nurturing: fertilizing and watering and watching out for pests and disease. Above all else, in order to produce fruit, the grape branches require a strong attachment to the source of their life, the vine. If they're just hanging on by a thread, they will die; if they're cut off, they will die. But if they are firmly attached to the vine, they will produce an abundant harvest of grapes to eat, to dry, to cook with, and to make into wine.

Just so, we can put on a nice display, look good, and even attach attractive things to our lives, but without a strong connection to our Vine, Jesus, we are simply decoration. We have no life. We produce no fruit.

The good news is that no matter how tenuous our link to the Vine might be, if we ask Him, God will help us to strengthen it. The same Jesus who turned water into wine can turn our weakness into a firm connection, rooted in the Vine of His life.



What things in my life are added on to look good but are not producing fruit?

What can I do today to strengthen my connection to God?

Exercise

1. Lift this exercise up to the Lord, asking Him to highlight what He wants you to notice.
2. Read the passage below, stopping at any words or phrases that catch your attention. Sit with the word or phrase, meditating on it and asking God to show you why this word or phrase caught your attention. After you've meditated on the thing that caught your attention, continue reading the passage, stopping at any other words or phrases that strike you, and discussing with the Lord what you've noticed.
3. Take a few moments to sit quietly before moving on to the next step.
4. Slowly read the passage a second time, again pausing when something catches your attention. This time ask God to show you what He wants you to know or do in light of the word or phrase that you've noticed. Wait to hear what the Lord may put into your heart or mind. (You may sense a strong impression or just what seems to be a fleeting thought. Don't dismiss anything.)
5. Take a few moments to sit quietly before moving on to the next step.
6. Slowly read the passage a third time, just letting God's Word soak into you.
7. Finally, sit quietly for a bit, and allow God to continue to work in you.

John 15:1-8

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also 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.

⁵"I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.