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Jesus said, I am the true vine. This five word clause is packed with layers of meaning. Entire books have been written about the “I am” statements in the Bible. The words “I am” carry a lot of theological weight, especially in our Judeo-Christian context. Those words first appear in our Bible in Exodus. They are the words God spoke to Moses at the burning bush and gave him his holy orders to free the Hebrew people. God had heard their cries and wanted to rescue them from the Egyptian pharaoh; the ruler who was causing them great suffering. Moses felt very unsure about this mission. He said to God, “Who am I that I should go to the Pharaoh?” (Ex 3:11) God told Moses to tell the Pharaoh and the Hebrew people that God himself had sent him. God said it this way, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, I AM has sent me to you.”

We know the rest of that story, don't we? Moses delivered the Hebrew people from slavery and suffering. But he did not do it alone. God was with Moses at every turn, helping him to face every challenge; from the Pharaoh and from the Hebrew people.

Jesus spoke those words of himself in John's gospel. In this particular passage, the author of John's gospel placed these words on Jesus' lips as he was approaching the end of his ministry; as he was preparing the disciples for his separation from them by death on the cross. In John's gospel, Jesus prepares the disciples in a series of seven discourses. In each of the discourses, Jesus reveals distinct aspects of who he is. Each of the seven I AM statements reveal something about the purpose of his ministry; something about God's hope for us being made incarnate in Jesus.

Jesus said I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Way. He said I am the Gate, the Light of the World, I am the Resurrection and the Life. All of these

describe ways that we can recognize Jesus as we come to know him; just as the disciples recognized those things about him as their relationship with him grew. And now at the end of his discourses he tells the disciples he is the vine and his Father is the vine grower. We might assume that Jesus uses a reference to “the vine” here in John’s gospel because in the other gospels he linked wine, that comes from a vine, to his own blood; and you’d be partly correct. To get at the layers of meaning of this clause, we need to consider more closely the context in which the author of John’s gospel was writing.

At the end of the first century when John’s gospel was written, there was considerable tension between the Jews who followed Christ and the orthodox Jews. The orthodox Jews had expelled the Christ followers from the synagogue. But there were also many people who were called God worshipers that attended the synagogue. The God worshipers were not orthodox Jews, they had not conformed to all the demands of being considered orthodox. But the God worshipers believed in the God of the Jews as opposed to the various gods worshipped by the Romans and Greeks. It was these folks who would be sympathetic to the message of John’s gospel. It was these folks who would be hearing the words of the apostle Paul who was preaching that the same God worshipped by the orthodox Jews was the God of Jesus Christ. It was this Jesus that wanted to bring them into God’s promise; God’s promise that he would be their God always.

The use of the vine image would resonate with anyone who participated in synagogue worship. First of all, theirs was an agrarian society and so the people everywhere would be familiar with the way in which vines grew; the fact that they needed to be tended and pruned to flourish. They would be familiar with the image from

the prophets, like Isaiah and Hosea, Jeremiah and Ezekial. In Jewish tradition the vine referred to Israel. Now, after Jesus, the vine image had been transferred to him; to the new extension of God's promise to all nations in Jesus. The hearers of John's gospel would also be familiar with the idea that a well tended vine produced bountiful fruit. If Jesus was the vine, then who wouldn't want to be grafted onto it and flourish?

The thing about grafts, though, is that the host can reject the graft. Something has to happen to the graft to make it adhere cleanly and wholly to the host. Just recently, I accompanied my mother to receive a skin graft. She had a very early stage melanoma completely removed and the second stage of healing was to receive a skin graft. The process of grafting is similar since it involves living tissue whether plant or human. The process involves nourishing both the host area receiving the graft and the graft itself. The goal in grafting is that the two become one, seamlessly one.

In my mother's grafting process, the doctors placed a patch soaked in antiseptic liquid onto the affected site. They attached it with stitches so that there would be no area of the wound left uncovered. I have a pretty brown thumb, but I can understand theoretically that plan grafting is similar. It is important to nourish both the host and the graft such that all the vessels between them feed each other. Once that happens, the result is a single sheet of skin; a single plant.

That's what Jesus means when he says, "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Jesus invites us to become one with Him; otherwise, it follows that we will not be able to realize God's hopes for us.

How do we become part of that vine? We start by knowing that God desires that for us. Scripture reveals to us in the gospels and in Paul's letters that God's dream for us is to come to him through Christ. There may be other ways to come to God, but Christ is the way that we are offered, the way that we know, the way that we trust. Jesus said, my father's house has many rooms but this is the room that we are familiar with. This is the room we choose to enter, we enter through the gate called Jesus. We are nourished by the bread of life called Jesus. We are given insight and guidance by the light of the world called Jesus. We guarded by the good shepherd.

There is not doubt that we will encounter troubled times in our lives. Those troubled times are represented in the gospels by the winds and rough waters on the Sea of Galilee. Those stories always show Jesus as the calming force, the one who is grounded in the confidence that deep faith provides. Like Moses at the burning bush, the disciples felt very unsure, even unsafe on their journey with Jesus. But Jesus let them know at every turn, just as God had let Moses know at every turn, that he was their rock; that they could depend on him.

Just recently I experienced rough seas. I was sailing on an outing and my daughter was with me. She was quite literally scared out of her wits. She sat beside me as the boat keeled to nearly parallel with the water. She hid her face against my shoulder. How could I, a priest, not think of the disciples when they encountered rough seas. But I found myself grounded in a sense of calm. I trusted. I had faith in those who were with me. I trusted that whatever happened, God would see us through. We eventually made it to shore. But I am confident that whatever the outcome, God would

make us whole. God is the vine grower and that vine is full life in Christ, now and forever.