

May 2, 2021
John 15:1-8

Easter 5
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Real and True”

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”

One of the first things that people notice when they enter my office is a framed photograph on the wall of three legendary players of the New York Yankees: Mickey Mantle, Roger Maris, and Joe Pepitone. While I often get some disapproving looks from fans of the Toronto Blue Jays, the photo often leads to a discussion of my childhood in New Jersey, and how rooting for the Yankees played an important role during those years. I found the photo at a silent auction fundraiser many years ago, and my successful bid brought it into my possession as a cherished reminder of those years when (except for one fan of the New York Mets) our whole neighbourhood cheered for the Yankees.

One feature of this photograph that gives it extra value is that it is signed by Joe Pepitone, who played first base for the Yankees during many of their World Series championship years. The photo also includes several means of verification that this is an authentic signature because the sports memorabilia industry is plagued by numerous fraudulent items that claim to be from sports stars but are mere forgeries. The company that sold me this photo went to great lengths to assure me that this is the real deal, that it really was signed by Joe Pepitone and not by some unknown fraudster who was good at mimicking the Yankee great's signature.

The presence of fraudulent items is not confined to the sports memorabilia industry; many manufacturers must go to great lengths to assure that poor imitations of their products are not being sold as the real thing. On many city streets you will find vendors offering name-brand goods at what appear to be bargain prices; but the general rule is that if someone offers you a Rolex for \$10, chances are it is not a real Rolex. The internet is also a notorious venue for fraudulent sales, with people offering what appears to be authentic items that turn out to be cheap knockoffs. Fraud, deception, and other forms of chicanery are rampant throughout our lives, so we must be careful in verifying that what is being offered to us is real and true, that it is authentically what it claims to be.

The world in which Jesus lived and taught was filled with fraudulent teachers and preachers, false messiahs who claimed to be something that they were not. Many people had been victimized by their false teachings and were therefore wary when the man from Nazareth came along proclaiming that his message was the very Word of God proclaiming the advent of God's Kingdom. Even John the Baptist, the one who baptized our Lord in the Jordan River, had a moment in which he questioned the authenticity of Jesus' identity and teaching, asking "*are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?*" (Matthew 11:3). When Jesus asks his disciples "*who do people say that the Son of Man is?*" his disciples replied, "*some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets*" (Matthew 16:13-14). While many accepted Jesus' invitation to discipleship and shared in Peter's confession that "*you are the Messiah, the Son of the living God*" (Matthew 16:16), many others could not believe that a person like Jesus could really be the authentic Messiah of God, the one who God would send to free God's people from their bondage and oppression under the Roman Empire. The one who John identifies as "*the Word that was with God, and the Word was God ... came to what was his own, and his own people did not know him*" (John 1:1, 11). Many refused to believe that Jesus was the authentic Son of God – after all, "*can anything good come out of Nazareth?*" (John 1:46).

Jesus' response to the skepticism of those who have difficulty accepting him as the real and true Messiah was often to point to his deeds as the proof of his identity. He responds to John the Baptist's question by pointing to the fact that "*the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them*" (Matthew 11:4-5). He responds to Nathaniel's sarcastic dismissal by greeting him as "*truly and Israelite in whom there is no deceit!*" to which Nathaniel confesses that Jesus is "*the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!*" (John 1:47, 49). The risen Lord Jesus Christ responds to Thomas' doubts when the disciples tell him "*we have seen the Lord*" by showing him the marks of his crucifixion, so that Thomas may confess Jesus as "*my Lord and my God*" (John 20:25, 28). Jesus offers the proof that people need so that they can believe that he is authentically who he claims to be, that he is the real and true Messiah, the one who comes to free God's people from their sins.

Jesus continues to prove the authenticity of his identity and mission through the "I am" statements that are scattered throughout the Fourth Gospel, in which Jesus uses common images to point to the reality of his work as "*the Word [that] became flesh and lived among us ... full of grace and truth*" (John 1:14). He identifies himself as the bread of life, the life of the world, the living water, and the gate through which

God's people may come into the presence of the Lord. He identifies himself as the resurrection and the life; he teaches his disciples that "*I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me*" (14:6). Last week, we heard Jesus identify himself as the Good Shepherd, the one who proves his authenticity because "*I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father. And I lay down my life for the sheep*" (10:14-15). Jesus purposely adds "good" to his identity as the shepherd, setting himself against the unfaithful shepherd who "*runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep*" (10:13). Jesus is who he claims to be because he is not merely a shepherd but a *good* shepherd, one who complete the Will of God in being faithful in caring for the people who God so loved that he sent his only Son so that all who believe might not perish but might have eternal life:

- "I myself will be the shepherd of my sheep, and I will make them lie down, says the LORD. I will seek the lost, and I will bring back the strayed, and I will bind up the injured, and I will strengthen the weak, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them with justice." – Ezekiel 34:15-16.

The final "I am" saying in John introduces the metaphor of the vine and its branches, a common sight in the ancient Near East that was also an image that was commonly used in the Old Testament, including Isaiah's image of "*the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed; righteousness, but heard a cry!*" (Isaiah 5:7). Vine imagery remained a symbol for Israel in rabbinic Scripture interpretation as well as in the Synoptic Gospels, including his parable of the wicked tenants that Jesus introduces in the person of "*a landowner who planted a vineyard, put a fence around it, dug a wine press in it and built a watch-tower. Then he leased it to tenants and went to another country*" (Matthew 21:33). As with the symbols of the other "I am" statements, the traditional symbol of the vine is wholly redefined by its Christological context, and by Jesus' insistence that he is not merely the vine but that "*I am the true vine, and my Father the vine-grower*" (15:1). Jesus insists that he is the "real" vine (*alethinos*), emphasizing that he is the source of "real" life, a life that can only come from above and from the Father. The authenticity of Jesus' self-identification is lodged in the context of his relationship with God and his relationship with the community of his followers ("*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing*" – 15:5). Jesus' words about himself are not only self-revelatory but are revelatory of the interrelationship of God, Jesus, and the community. All three elements – gardener, vine, and branches – are essential to the

production of fruit. Jesus is the “true, real” vine because he comes from the Father, “*the only true God*” (17:3).

Like the song of the vineyard in Isaiah, God plays the role of gardener in the judgment of the vineyard:

- “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no more upon it.” – Isaiah 5:5-6.

“Bearing fruit” refers to the works of love that are required of Jesus’ followers (“*This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you*” – 15:12). The imagery of trimming branches so that they bear more fruit involves a growth in love that binds the Christian to Jesus and spreads life to others. The Christians to whom this passage is addressed would have become branches through baptism. This would make them fruit-bearing because it would give them life begotten from above and would make them clean (“*One who has bathed does not need to wash, except for the fee, but is entirely clean.*” – 13:10). The unproductive branches refer to the people within the Christian faith community who do not bear fruit in love; Jesus’ focus is on “*every branch in me,*” people who are already in relationship with Jesus through their baptism into the body of Christ (“*For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body – Jews or Greeks, slaves or free – and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.*” – 1 Corinthians 12:13).

Jesus’ statement that “*every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit*” (15:2) uses the word *kathairo* that has the double meaning of “prune” and “cleanse.” Jesus uses this word to refer to staying in relationship to Jesus and his Word. Jesus’ abiding in the disciples provides the grounds for his faithfulness to him; relationship with Jesus is the key to bearing fruit, which will express itself in their bearing the fruits of love by which “*everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another*” (13:35).

- “The branches, the people individually, congregations, and even denominations, cannot continue to grow and to thrive within the Body of Christ unless they hold closely to the teachings of Jesus ... The guiding principle by which all would be transformed into the image of Christ is boundless love of God and neighbour. In addition, because of that love, each

person would seek to bring others into the beloved community to become fully a part of the Body of Christ.” – Gennifer Benjamin Brooks.

Jesus’ repeated statement “*I am the vine*” now explicitly links the community’s self-identity with Jesus’ identity when he states that “*you are the branches.*” The language of this verse is an accurate representation of the pruning and cleaning of the vineyard and the fate of unproductive branches:

- “Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted. They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down; may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance. But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.” – Psalm 80:14-19.

If the disciples are made clean, they must respond by remaining in Jesus. If the disciples remain in Jesus through faith, he remains in them through love and faithfulness. In order to bear fruit, one must remain in Jesus.

- “The life of such a person, whether great or small and no matter what it is called, is nothing but fruit and cannot be without fruit; for in Christ that person has been born into a new existence, in order to be constantly full of good fruit. Everything such a person does becomes easy, not troublesome or vexatious. Nothing then is too arduous or too difficult to suffer and bear.” – Martin Luther.

Jesus links the promise of answered prayer with the community’s abiding in Jesus: “*if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you*” (15:7). The community’s works will continue the glorification of God that characterizes Jesus’ own works. To bear fruit – that is, to do works of love – is the tangible sign of discipleship: “*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*” (15:8). As Jesus’ claim to be the true vine is authenticated by his deeds of love for all God’s people, so also “*the mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift, to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains in Jesus.*” (Gail O’Day).

Jesus proved that he was the real and true Messiah through his preaching, teaching, and miracles that authenticated his identity as the one sent from God to be the Saviour

of all people. When we are baptized in the name of our Lord and Saviour, we are joined to his body which is the Church and called to embody his love in the world in which we live. Our identity as God's people is authenticated in the same way Jesus proves the truthfulness of his identity: when we continue to live according to his commandment to love one another, to bear the fruits of this love that "*bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things*" (1 Corinthians 13:7) that can only come when we remain rooted in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, our source of nourishment and strength that will allow us to bear the fruits that God desires that all people enjoy.

- "Bearing fruit means engaging for ourselves as individuals and as the church in those activities and tasks that recognize and invest in the goodness of God's love by spreading that love to the neighbour whom we are called to love. The specifics of bearing fruit are left to the community as a whole and to each individual who receives the nurture that both Christ and the community provide. Each and all must come to the realization that we are not self-made. Yes, we are individuals, but as Christians the individualism so admired by the world must take a back seat to the reality that all that we are and have are as a result of the abiding grace of God." – Brooks.

At a time when the identity of the Church as "*the assembly of all believers among whom the Gospel is purely preached and the sacraments administered according to the Gospel*" (*Augsburg Confession*) has been temporarily suspended, we can prove that we are really and truly the people of God by our continuing acts of love for one another. There are many things that we are currently be prevented from doing, but the love of God can be extended through many small acts of lovingkindness and caring for others. As Jesus taught his disciples that "*whoever gives you a cup of water to drink because you bear the name of Christ will my no means lose their reward*" (Mark 9:41), every small act – a kind word, a phone call, a note, a bag of groceries left on a doorstep – are the tangible proof that we are truly the people of God, branches of the true vine that prove that we are God's people by bearing the fruits of love through which everyone will know that we are the people of God; "*they will know we are Christians by our love.*"

I treasure my photo of those great Yankees players not because of its monetary value which is authenticated on the frame but because of the memories it inspires in me. Our authenticity as the Church of Jesus Christ does not come from where we gather or what we possess, but in the way we live as God's people. As Jesus is the true vine because in him "*God proves his love for us in that while we still were sinners Christ*

died for us” (Romans 5:8), we can witness to the truth of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and our mission as the Church of Jesus Christ when we live in accordance with Christ’s command to bear the fruits of love, a living witness that we are the real and true followers of the real and true vine, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.