



# Replanting

John 15:1-17

# *REPLANTING*

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I have a very clear memory from April 2020 of walking down the baking aisle at the grocery store, and seeing that every single bag of flour was gone. Every brand, every size of bag, bought and squirrelled away at home. But it struck me as funny that there was a lot of yeast left - absolutely essential to the bread-making process - and yet, not a speck of flour.

And while perhaps the people of Sarnia were eating a lot of cake and cookies and biscuits...a week later, all of the yeast was gone, too, when I went shopping again. Bread-making was a huge craze at the beginning of the pandemic, do you remember? Especially among those who hadn't baked it before. And gardening got a big boost that spring too, with seeds and plants and potting soil bought up as fast as they became available. Pet adoptions also soared, and I hope that many of those adoptions resulted in lasting friendships.

Of all the unusual new pandemic hobbies we all seemed to pick up, the one I really embraced was house plants. I've always had one or two, and a few pots of herbs in the summer. But my collection has expanded exponentially over the last two years, all shapes and sizes, many with fussy requirements of moisture and light to help them flourish. I even have a couple of grow bulbs so that my plants can have spa days in the winter...

But this plant - this one lives here at St. Andrew's in my office. It's my first Sarnia houseplant, bought the first week I arrived, before I even had an apartment to put plants in; I was still living in an AirBnb. It's a heart-leaf philodendron. I got it at Home Depot, and it was just a cluster of leaves on a few stems. A couple of times a year, I cut about three feet of vine off the ends to keep it from taking over the entire church; which is a real possibility: I went on vacation once and came back to find it had wrapped itself around my desk lamp.

It's not a perfect match for the kind of vines that Jesus was talking about, when he said, "I am the true vine." Jesus spoke of a vine that bore fruit, so he was probably talking about grape vines or something similar.

But what my little plant does show us is the lush vine growth that comes from just a few little stems or branches; it shows us how tightly woven together those vines are, so much so that disentangling them from each other risks damage; and it shows how vulnerable a plant is, too: one snip, and a vine falls away from the rest, cut off from the central stem.

Many of us imagine our relationship with God in a very individual way: me, Jesus and my Bible. We don't necessarily assume that our faith and our personal connection with God has anything important to do with a larger community of believers. But no biblical person, from the Old Testament or the New, would have envisioned his or her own relationship with God as separate from the worshipping community's relationship with God. It wouldn't even occur to them. Like a vining plant, we are all connected, whether we like it or not; what we do or don't do, in fact, affects the worshipping community - our congregation and Christ's church in the world - near and far.

That's why Jesus goes on and on about it, using the organic images of vines and branches, and finally, the language of friendship and love. If we want to strengthen our relationship with God, we have to strengthen our relationships with each other. If we are not a worshipping community marked by friendship and love, then we might as well close up shop. If friendship and love are not our key goals and indicators of success, then we may be many things, some even useful and worthwhile, but we are not a Christian community. And it's not me, your minister, saying this; it's Jesus himself, right here in John 15.

Our Gospel reading today, and our "I am" statement, comes from what is called the Farewell Discourse, Jesus' last conversation with his disciples and friends. The conversation will end with his arrest. In the excerpt that we read together today, Jesus uses the language of the garden to unpack a trio of relationships, bonds that happily criss-cross among the things of heaven and earth: God the Father and Jesus, Jesus and us, and the relationships among his followers, among us: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower, and you are the branches."

The whole garden, we know, belongs to God, created out of nothing, shaped by God's imagination and creative power. And yet, in John 1, right at the beginning, the gospel writer teaches us that Christ the Word, Jesus, in some way, was present and participating in that creative work: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made."



And chapter 20 finds a resurrected Jesus walking in a garden, where Mary Magdalene mistook him for the Gardener.

Jesus waxes almost poetic about his Father in the chapter before this one - which we'll be looking at next Sunday - talking about the inextricable connection between the two, how Jesus is in the Father and the Father is in him. The first of our trio of relationships, then, is marked by dependence on each other, by trust in one another, by mutuality: a sharing of feeling and action between God the Father and God the Son. The vineyard image upon which Jesus draws is an old metaphor for the relationship between God and his people. In both the Psalms and the prophets of the Old Testament, we find God's people portrayed as God's vineyard, about how carefully God planted and cared for it, building watchtowers for its protection and delighting in it, as it flowered and fruited, by responding faithfully to God's word. Jesus picks up this gardening language and takes it further, and deeper, to unfold the second relationship of this chapter: the one between Jesus and us.

Listen very carefully to this well-known verse; as I read it to you, look around at everyone sitting here together today, and try to take it personally: Jesus says, "I 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." We are the branches and we abide in him, and he abides in us.

With my little houseplant here, you won't be able to see it from where you're sitting, but Jesus is the fine, sturdy green stalks, right here running into the soil; we are the wild, abundant leafy branches, pouring over the side of the pulpit. Christ abides in the Father and the Father abides in him, and we abide in Christ. The word "abide," or *meno* in the Greek, is another one of the special words of John's gospel, like the word "life" which we talked about last week. And like life, abide appears throughout this gospel, in sixteen of its twenty-one chapters, over forty times. *Meno* is a deeply relational word, and can be translated as "abide," "remain," or "stay." When Jesus spoke of himself as the bread of life, he went on to explain that "whoever eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in them...the one who feeds on me will live because of me."

So this abiding is life-giving, sustaining connection between us and Jesus. A real, spiritually-significant link, vital and necessary.

I wonder how Jesus feels when he loses a branch. One of the most important things about what Jesus says, that we often skip past in our quest to think more about ourselves and how we feel about God, is just how much Jesus wants to be close to us. And how close, in fact, Jesus is to his people when all this “abiding” carries on as it should. The branches the Father cuts off are described as having been “in me.” This soon-to-be dead branch once had a relationship with Jesus the vine that is just as intimate and close as every other remaining branch has. It is not as though these branches once floated freely above the vine or had perhaps only a small tenuous connection to the larger vine stem. We can’t see any branches floating up and away, or poking off in opposite directions on my little plant here, can we? Even the wandering vine that wound around my desk lamp was still firmly attached to the main stem, and took its place among all the others as part of a luxurious whole, with only a little gentle coaxing.

A branch is a branch and it is united with the vine in a living, sustaining way. To lose such a branch is to lose a part of the vine, a part of Christ’s very self. It’s no wonder that Jesus speaks with such fervency and passion, encouraging us to not let that happen. Jesus is dedicated to keeping all his branches attached to the vine, fiercely desiring that they remain, abiding in his love even as Jesus himself abides in the Father and his words remain in the heart of every branch.

But we are not very well-behaved branches. Most people in Canada and in other parts of the world are accustomed to living in societies where a lot of what we do, our association with groups or organizations, a lot of it is voluntary. We view our membership and involvement in almost every institution as something that is up to us. We can join and we can leave at will. No big deal. So we tend to view the status of membership to this or that group as temporary, our belonging as something we do at arm’s length from everyone. Being a self-volunteered member allows a certain distance to exist in the relationship, or a sense of detachment, of coming and going as we please. And so, even in terms of belonging to a church, we struggle with that same sense of distance, of coming and going as we please.

Eugene Peterson- you may know him as the man behind The Message translation of the Bible - Peterson once wrote that we have a hard time wrapping our minds around the idea that to say, “I am a member of First Denomination Church” is biblically-speaking like introducing your own hand to people as a member of your body. Being a voluntary member of a group means joining or leaving are very easy things. Being a body part or a branch of a vine has rather different connotations.

A hand can't resign from the body without some dramatic effects, and a branch cannot leave the vine without some trauma on both sides from the pruning shears.

We are the branches: if we stay connected to Jesus the true vine, which is nurtured by God, the vinegrower, we will bear the fruits that Jesus promises: love. But not just love as a feeling inside us, like a warm glowing ember. Love directed at each other, across the bonds of friendship. We are not merely servants or attached to Jesus; we are his friends, and love is directed toward friends, in Jesus' own case, going so far, loving his friends so greatly, that he would lay down his life for them. Over the years I've been your minister we have talked a lot about love, especially the active, agape love of serving others for Jesus' sake. So today, I thought we'd take a different direction and reflect on phileo love, the love between Christian friends.

With his trio of relationships in this passage, Jesus offers us a picture of Christian friendship that is a reflection of the friendship, the abiding bond, that Jesus has with his Father, and with the disciples and now, each one of us. What did we learn about friendship here? That it is meant to be grounded in trust, and lived out in mutuality, in shared feeling and action. That friends can depend on one another for whatever they need: help, a listening, unjudging ear, forgiveness, someone to celebrate with, and someone to mourn with.

We are branches, connected to the same vine, yes, but a vining plant with only a single branch on it is not much of vine. How sad would my little houseplant look, with only one trailing branch? Together, we are the branches; together we create something abundant, growing and vibrant, connected to Christ, tended by God.

I wonder what obstacles there might be to Christian friendship, obstacles we've encountered or that we might imagine could exist. I can think of a few; I'm sure you could think of others, too. Sometimes followers of Jesus compete when they should cooperate. There are stories, elsewhere in the Bible, of the disciples fighting over who is the best disciple; of the mother of a couple of the disciples trying to get Jesus to promise that they'd sit at his right and left in heaven. Pride is another dividing, unfriendly attitude. Pride can tell us we don't need other people; that we don't need their support or help, that building our own sense of self-worth requires us to devalue others. Trust, the very foundation of friendship, can be difficult, too. Remember Judas? Betrayed trust will be taking centre stage in the Lent story in only a few weeks.

And then there is fear. There are probably as many fears as there are people. Fear of losing control over something, or of not being in charge or needed anymore; fear of making ourselves vulnerable to other people; fear that our friends may run out of friendship-energy, and we'll get left out. We could likely write a good long list of reasons why it's naive to reach out in friendship to someone we barely know. Like I said, these are just a few reasons why Christian friendship can be challenging. I'm sure that you could think of other reasons yourself. But knowing the obstacles and pitfalls that might make it hard for us to follow Jesus' command to love one another like friends, that lets us imagine how we might intentionally work to abide together in Jesus.

What we're doing right now - coming together at the same time, gathering in the same place every Sunday together - that's the first and perhaps simplest way of being Christian friends: worshiping the same God side-by-side together. Working together is another way; aside from what all our teams and committees accomplish through their service, serving together is one of the very best ways of being branches together. Coming together for devotionals or Bible studies, intentionally growing our faith in small groups, like a cluster of branches, that's another way to build trust, mutuality and Christian friendship with each other.

The time we spend together after worship, sitting around chatting and drinking tea and coffee...many of us missed that time deeply when we couldn't have it, and I suspect that's because it's a lot more than social time. What we believe about church, about what it means to be branches together in Christ, is reflected in our coffee hour, too, whether we realize it or not.

Coffee hour, teams and committees, small groups, worship itself are not just things a church does; they're the reality test of whether we live what we say we believe, if we really are a different kind of community, and deeply connected to one another in Christ in a way no other kind of human community can be.

We are the branches. If we stay connected to the true vine, Jesus, which is nurtured by God, the vinegrower, we will bear the fruits of love and friendship. If we don't, we won't. We will come and go, from one another and from Jesus, holding our relationships lightly, rather than rooting them deeply. But Jesus not only promises us more than that, he gives us more: more of himself and his Father, as he abides in us and we abide in him. More of one another, too, as we grow together, like the twining branches of a vining plant. Thanks be to God. Amen.