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*Life on the Vine*  
*John 15:1-11*

All I have to do to understand this passage is sit *on my back porch* under the arbor on my porch swing.

The vines growing on the arbor are only now receiving some care and attention, so they've grown out of control....the vines have attached themselves to just about everything, and turned into a big tangled mess with a little bit of growth, and a whole lot of dead twigs.... that keep falling on my head as I drink my coffee.

I know that once I get done with all the necessary pruning and cleaning though ... eventually...it will be beautiful.

Right outside my front door is another great image. The *crepe myrtles*, which look like dead wood most of the year, just now are starting to grow, and by the end of summer.... They will be beautiful.

I was reading about the *Napa Valley* in California.

The first year a vintner plants shoots of vines rather than seeds because these yield the strongest vines. At the end of the first growing season, he cuts them back. A second year passes. He cuts them back again. Only after the third year does he see his first viable clusters of grapes. Serious vintners leave those clusters on the vines. For most vintners, it's not until year four that they bring in their first harvest.

And after they bottle their harvest, some won't taste the fruit of their labors until year seven or eight. Most vineyards in Napa Valley won't reach a breakeven point for their investment until year fifteen, eighteen or beyond.

Life on the vine *doesn't always* look good....  
 It doesn't always look pretty....  
 In fact sometimes, it might even look and feel kind of dead,

Many flowers, like pansies have to be '*dead-headed*' to bring forth even greater blooms, those first few beautiful flowers actually picked right off in order to create something even better down the road.

And sometimes it's just *not the season* for a particular fruit or bloom,  
 And the branches just look bare....

Life on the vine *doesn't always look* or feel so good.

*So true, isn't it?*

We walk through those times in life when it doesn't look so good,  
 When everything doesn't look very pretty,  
 In fact, sometimes it looks and feels kind of dead....  
 Our branches look pretty bare

And Jesus says to us-- *stay close*.  
 In this final "I AM" statement in the Gospel of John,  
 In this beautiful passage spoken to his disciples on his last night,  
 Jesus says let me give you some *reassurance*, some *strength* to draw upon---  
 Not just for right now when things might look and sound bleak,  
 But for the days ahead when things might look and sound even more bleak;  
 Knowing that he was going to the cross.

*He says, Stay close.*

I AM the vine.

Abide in me as I abide in you.

In other words--Stay close to me, just as I am so close to you.

The Message Bible says, "Make your home in me, just as I make my home in you."

I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me, who stay close to me, *bear a lot of fruit*,

Those fruits of my Spirit....love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness,  
 faithfulness, and self-control.

apart from me, you cannot even truly live.

I am the vine...God is the master gardener.  
 You are the branches, so stay connected.  
 This is the best way for you to live and grow, and **find joy**.  
*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you,  
 And your joy may be complete.....*

Sometimes it's going to **look difficult** ....because the world is a mess,  
 Sometimes it's going to **feel difficult** because God is wanting us to grow in here.  
 So we are pruned, cleansed, like branches that need to be cared for in the garden.

Like those vines in the vineyard that must be pruned year after year  
 before they yield the best grapes....  
 like those flowers that are cut back in order to grow more beautiful in their season.

Without this pruning, we'll grow a little here and there,  
 We'll **attach ourselves** to anything and everything we find in the world....  
 but eventually without the care of the gardener,  
 We'll get further and **further** from the central vine,  
 And become a tangled mess of branches....  
 Then we are liable to shrivel up and die.  
 To become like the dead twigs I brought here from my back porch.

Without any care or pruning, we cannot bear fruit...  
 Those fruits of the Spirit we all so desperately want and need in our lives.

So Jesus wants us to **be pruned, and stay close**.  
 You know how people say so casually to one another,  
 In tough times--just 'hang in there'?  
 Jesus offers something more than just *hang in there*.....  
 Jesus offers a different way to look at life---  
 Stay close to me, to other believers,  
 And this really will bring you to a fruitful life, this really is a pathway to joy.

How do we get **pruned**?  
 Jesus says right here in John 15 that we are pruned with God's own **Word**,  
 We are cleaned up with the word of God in our lives.....showing us how to live,  
*2 Timothy 3:16 says God's word is inspired, useful for teaching, reproof,  
 correction, training in righteousness, so that everyone will be equipped for every  
 good work.*

So we have to open the Word, read it, learn it, and let it seep into our hearts...

I believe we're also *pruned in prayer*...

Sometimes the answer is not what we expect,  
sometimes it is to wait, or to receive something else, something that will work it's  
way out for good—but we may not see it that way right now.

It might look barren, dead, pruned.

So we pray, and pray, and keep on praying!

Sometimes we don't know what to pray, and the Spirit prays for us.

I believe we are pruned in our *community of other believers*....

It is here that we learn how to truly love one another.

In our Bible study of John this past Wednesday we were talking about what it  
means to be a disciple of Jesus....and how sometimes we find it easier to love the  
victims of a disaster somewhere else, or starving children of another country,  
than it is to love the person who sits behind us in church,

We truly learn to love with the people right beside us,

the ones we like and the ones we would never expect to like.

You know what our *Elders and I did* last Monday night as part of our meeting?

We just prayed---we listened to what was going on in one another's lives, and we  
prayed for each person, because as spiritual leaders in the church we need to be  
caring for one another, lifting one another up. Not just saying 'hang in there', but  
offering our prayers, our hearts, our care to one another in real, meaningful ways.

We are to be Christ to one another.

That's true for the whole church!

We need to be *so close* to one another—that when it comes time to be there for one  
another we are not afraid to stop and pray for one another, *not just say we will*,  
for the real concerns of the heart.

When it comes time to be there for one another,

we should not be afraid to be there for the real needs of *daily living*.

I can't tell you how much some people in this church have saved my sanity by  
helping my family in the most practical of ways.

I know of dozens of you who have ministered to one another through meals and  
rides and cries on the shoulder....

It's wonderful to remember and lift up everyone to the Lord  
who is in need in prayer...

but sometimes we *hide behind the needs of others*  
 all the while needing the help of the community ourselves....  
 All because we feel their need is so much greater,  
 when we should be *authentic* and reveal our own heart to our neighbors right here  
 at First Presbyterian Owasso, our fellow branches on the vine....  
 ones who can pray for us, and for whom we can pray and help and love.

Jesus said, I am the true vine, my Father is the vinegrower,  
 Abide in me as I abide in you.

You know what he said after John 15:1-11?

*This is my commandment: that you love one another as I have loved you.*

*No one has greater love than this, to **lay down one's life** for one's friends.*

*I no longer call you servants, I call you my friends.*

See where Jesus is *going with all this?*

He is the vine, we are the branches, God is the master gardener,

So that we will experience *God's love*,

Through the person of Jesus Christ,

Through the **people** who are the body of Christ,

Through the **fruits** of the Spirit of Christ,

So that we might be the **hands and feet** of Jesus Christ and share that same  
 Amazing **love** of God.

Stay close to *me*, He said.

Stay close to *one another*.

Those who stay close to me will bear much fruit,

Apart from me, you can do nothing.

Everyone who bears fruit will be pruned...just to help you bear more fruit.

But life on the vine will bring you great joy, and show you God's love.

May we all do more than just hang in there.....

may we stay close to Him, and close to one another. Amen.

