

Ego Eimi, Part 4: “I am the true vine”

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When Jesus talks about himself being the True Vine, what kind of vine do you suppose he was talking about? There are many kinds of vines in the world. Popular fruit-bearing vines include kiwi, passionfruit, and tomato, watermelon, cantalope, blackberry, and grape. I like to think of Jesus as a grape vine, myself. But actually, Jesus most likely was comparing himself to a grape vine, given how prominently grapes and grape vines feature in the Bible and in Israelite agriculture. Israel herself is compared to a grapevine in the Old Testament (e.g., Joel 1:7) – an identity that was depicted symbolically at the entrance of the great Temple in Jerusalem. The Jewish historian Josephus writes that a sculpted vine was mounted over the entrance whose grape clusters were as tall as a person.

There are a couple of features of wine grapes that I find helpful to know about when interpreting the meaning of Jesus’s words in John about being the True Vine and the fruit produced by it. First, properly tended wine grapes pick up the flavor of the soil in which they are grown. In the wine world, this quality is known as the *terroir*. If the soil is full of gravel, you’ll taste it in the wine. If the soil is chalky, this quality, too, will be passed on to the wine.

What would the *terroir* of wine made from Jesus’s True Vine taste like? Being planted firmly in the soil of God’s Kingdom, my guess is that any wine coming from Jesus’s grape vines would reflect the *terroir* of the Kingdom. Perhaps the wine would bear the same qualities of the fruits of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5:22-23)

Here’s another interesting fact about wine grapes: The very best wine producers deliberately stress their vines to produce the most flavor in their grapes. They may grow their vines in excessively rocky soil so the roots have to struggle to become established. They may water their vines as little as possible so that the vine must ration every drop of water coming into it.

The reason this kind of stress treatment is undergone is because when a grape vine comes under stress it essentially performs emergency triage, giving the fruit the highest priority for receiving nutrients and water. The result is a grape with super-concentrated flavor, which produces full-bodied, sought-after wines.

Isn’t it interesting that the best wine is produced directly through vines that struggle – that struggle in the soil of a well-chosen *terroir*.

Applying all this to Jesus calling himself the True Vine, I would assume this means that the special fruit he produces reflects the *terroir* of the soil of God’s Kingdom – love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – to which is added the additional component of struggle. So Jesus’s wine might taste like

love that has turned the other cheek, and joy that is born out of sorrow; peace that has been waged in the midst of calls to war, and gentleness and self-control that have stood their ground through brutality.

In other words, if you drink Jesus's wine, you're going to experience some pretty amazing flavors, yet they have all come at a cost; they have all been born out of his particular struggles.

But Jesus doesn't call us to be wine *drinkers*. He calls us to to be wine *producers*. He is the vine, and we are called to be the branches – branches that produce grape clusters. The only thing necessary, he says, for growing abundant fruit is to abide in him.

What does it mean to abide in Jesus? Presumably it means to take the nutrients he passes on to you from the soil of God's Kingdom and bear fruit with it. And I'm guessing that abiding in Jesus means getting quite comfortable with struggle, just as Jesus was, so that only the finest wine results.

Don't you just wish Jesus could have compared himself to a squash vine instead of a grape vine? Then the lesson for us squash branches would be: Don't worry, be happy! Just do nothing and practically no matter what the weather or what the soil, you're going to be so productive that you will overflow every container they set your produce in. People will be paying their neighbors just to take in some of what you are going to produce. It will be that easy.

But no, Jesus had to be a grape vine. And while we may not like the fact that embracing struggle is part of what it means to be a branch on Jesus's vine, sometimes it can give a person a lot of hope. For instance, when a Christian looks to the future and anticipates a higher-than-normal degree of struggle in our country just to maintain basic human decency and promote classic spiritual values, our response is to remain hopeful. For we know that the upcoming grape growing season with its higher-than-average propensity for struggle, is going to yield especially concentrated wine down the road. Provided we will abide in the vine rather than grafting ourselves onto squash plants, we will produce the kind of wine worthy of God's Realm.

There is, of course, one thing that stands out as particularly bothersome in Jesus's metaphor about being the vine. I'm thinking about his statement that, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

It sounds like Jesus is threatening people, doesn't it? Like, "If you don't produce some plump fruit I'll cast you away into the fires of hell." Actually, this could not be further from what Jesus is saying. Remember, Jesus had no notion of hell like some Christians do today. While he mentions being thrown into the fire, nowhere does he mention hell.

Do you remember what the primary symbol of the Holy Spirit is in the New Testament? Fire. And do you remember who Jesus said are the withering branches who will be cast

into the fire? Not those in whom Jesus abides but those who do not abide in Jesus. In other words, those who are constantly being invited into relationship with Jesus yet choose to reject that relationship. Some people don't like the fact that being in relationship with Jesus means struggling to enact the Kingdom's values in the world. Perhaps if Jesus were a godly Squash Vine they would more readily accept his program.

In any case, all is not lost even for those who refuse to abide with Jesus. True, they'll be transformed by the fire/Holy Spirit in order to emerge once again as something alive, but this is far from saying God gives up on them, or punishes them.

This understanding of God's grace is particularly clear in the writings of the apostle Paul, who takes up a similar metaphor in his letter to the Romans, only instead of vines and pruning he speaks of *trees and grafting*.

"The moment you become deadwood," says Paul, "you're out of there." This is Paul's equivalent of Jesus saying that God cuts off the dead branches from the vine. But then Paul continues:

"And don't get to feeling superior to those pruned branches down on the ground. If they don't persist in remaining deadwood, *they could very well get grafted back in*. God can do that. [God] can perform miracle grafts. Why, if [God] could graft *you* – branches cut from a tree out in the wild – into an orchard tree, [God] certainly isn't going to have any trouble grafting branches back into the tree they grew from in the first place. Just be glad you're in the tree, and hope for the best for the others."

Tree or vine, the central message is the same: we are made for abundantly fruitful and productive relationship with God in this world. The only way you can *not* be in relationship, or not bear fruit from it, is to refuse what God freely offers you. And what we are being offered as Christians is the chance to produce world-class wines with the super-concentrated flavors of love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control – these favors, consecrated – and concentrated – through our embrace of Jesus's Path of struggle and hope.