



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

Sept 6, 2015

"I Am the Vine" (THE VINE Sermon Series)

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**J**ohn 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

*John 15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*

*John 15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.*

*John 15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*

*John 15:5 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.*

*John 15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

*John 15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

Every year I give a state-of-the-union address, or in this case, a state-of-the church address. This is where I share with you my view of our church, how it's faring, where it's headed, and what needs to be done so we can accomplish what God has given us to do. September is a good time to do that because it's traditionally when a new academic

year starts and when we are open to new ideas.

The spiritual basis for my view of our church is the Gospel of John chapter 15, where Jesus says "I am the Vine, and my Father is the Vinegrower," or the Gardener who cares for the branches and makes them fruitful.

From now up to Christmas, we are going to go through the entire chapter 15 to look at what it means that Jesus is the Vine, God the Father is the Vinegrower, and we are the branches. There will be practical lessons on what it means to be cultivated, connected, crushed, pruned, what it means to be fruitful, and why we need to rest and lie fallow at times.

We'll also look at what it means when Jesus said there should be new wine, and specifically new wine served in NEW wineskins and not old ones. Hence, Chapter 15 is rich in meaning, which has been so for centuries. There are lessons all throughout Scripture that deal with vineyards, vinegrowers, and fruit and, yes, even wine.

The vine motif is not only for Israel but in our own Hawaii history. Have you ever wondered why we have a street named Vineyard Boulevard? It's because in the early 1800's, nearly a century before annexation, a Spaniard named Don Francisco de Paul Marin planted grapes, a vineyard in the area we now

know as Vineyard Boulevard! Hence, the Hawaiian saying, "We don't serve wine before it's....da kine." I have no idea what that means but it was the only rhyme that was sublime!

Seriously, this Gospel of John monologue of Jesus in Chapter 15 records what the Lord said just after the Last Supper when He and the disciples walked to the Garden of Gethsemane, which was followed by His arrest and ultimately death. Last words, especially those of Jesus, are immensely important and need to be studied.

As for my vision—what I see for our church—for 2015-16, it is this: First, I see a church that is truly grafted into the Vine, thoroughly, completely, intimately grafted into the ONLY AND TRUE VINE, who is Jesus Christ. Second, I see a people who, because of Jesus, are open to TRUE CHANGE— reinvention, transformation— personally, that's deep in their individual souls, as well as corporately.

Being attached to the true vine and open to true change lead to the third part of my vision: TRUE COMMUNITY. Because we are connected to Jesus the TRUE VINE, and open to TRUE CHANGE, we become His TRUE COMMUNITY that strives to be authentic, and not necessarily perfect.

## 1) TRUE VINE

What does it mean that Jesus refers to Himself as The True Vine?

Once said that three of the most important decisions in one's life are: mate, master, and mission. Mate, meaning IF God calls you to marriage, who will be your mate? Big decision! Who you choose could lead to happiness or sadness. I'm not going to talk about this today, but I do know of a great non-best-selling book about how to pick a spouse.

But the other two, master and mission, I do want to talk about. First, master. We must all decide who will be the master in our life. Will it be Buddha, Mohammed, Gandhi, Donald Trump, Hilary Clinton, Jesus Christ or yourself or whoever? Who is the master of our life? Our ego? Are we the captain of our own soul and master of our own fate?

Or, to put it into the words of Jesus, who came up with this brilliant metaphor perfect for ancient Palestine as well as today, who is the True Vine? If we are the branches, what or who is the vine that we want to be connected to for nourishment and direction in life? Who is perfect and trustworthy?

Jesus Christ, the Son of God – fully human but fully God says, “I am the True Vine.” He did not say “a” vine, “a good vine”, “a pretty good vine,” “a better than average vine,” but THE TRUE Vine. Just before calling Himself the True Vine, Jesus boldly and candidly said in the same speech, *“I am the way, the truth, the life and no one comes to the Father except through me.” (John 14:6)*

He said it is critical for our people to know and believe deep in our hearts that He is the True Vine. Jesus is the one we really need to be connected to. He is the one we have to be part of. He is the one who has to be our main lifeline, our main source of joy and purpose. What is really hard for followers of Jesus is that there are a lot of false gods around us,

and so we easily end up bowing to them and following them even though we say we follow Jesus.

There can be the false god of financial security. If your heart drops or skips every time the Dow Jones average goes up or down, it might be an indicator of what vine you're attached to and where your true security lies. If we are people pleasers, it might mean that whatever people think of us or what they want us to do are really our gods.

It is really easy to follow a false god. It could be money, sex, power, fame, status, or the God of being critical of ourselves (we are not smart enough, pretty enough, strong enough, accomplished enough). For some it could be the false god of entertainment, which could be so subtle.

There are times when my beloved USC Trojans lose a football game, I feel bummed all day, and if they win, I feel so elated. But that is not right. Entertainment should not dictate my ups and downs. I'm not saying that USC football is a false god, but sports teams or events can be, if they greatly affect how we spend our money and time, and how they dictate our emotions.

People who gamble on sports find their emotions rising and falling because in addition to entertainment, money is involved too. Gambling is a false god that eats up our time, money, and thought life, and for some it destroys their families too. Gambling always makes us think that someday we will be rich for just being lucky.

For some, a false god could be achievement. We always need to be careful of what our calendar or our children's calendar looks like. Why are we filling our kids' calendar with so many activities? Are we trying to fill up their resume so they go to a nice

college and get a good job with a secure salary?

It's good to be responsible. But are we feeding our children to the false god of money as opposed to trying to strengthen their faith in Jesus, who is the real source of their security? If we look at our calendars or our checkbook, I think we can get a really good idea if there are false gods or not. Some people spend so much money on entertainment that really that thrill becomes a false god.

A false god, which is a big one for American Christians, is that in following Jesus we have no pain or discomfort. Hence, we get mad and wonder why bad things happen to good people. Jesus said bad things happen to good people, but He will help us.

Here's the real test of maturity of faith. We are spiritually mature when our prayer is that I might accomplish God's agenda rather than always praying to God that He would accomplish MY agenda.

Richard Rohr writes, “Christians are usually sincere and well-intentioned people until you get to any real issues of ego, control power, money, pleasure, and security. Then they tend to be pretty much like everybody else. We often given a bogus version of the Gospel, some fast-food religion, without any deep transformation of the self. And the result has been the spiritual disaster of "Christian" countries that tend to be as consumer-oriented, proud, warlike, racist, class conscious, and addictive as everybody else-and often more so, I'm afraid.” (from “Breathing Underwater: Spirituality and the 12 Steps” by Richard Rohr)

Jesus is the True Vine. If we are truly connected to Him and know that He is our prime source of strength, wisdom and encouragement our lives will be so much more joyful.

It will be more fun and more adventurous than a busy calendar. We have to be willing to push our ego off of the throne of our lives. Another quote from Richard Rohr: “The ego hates losing – even to God.” (from “Falling Upward: a Spirituality for the Two Halves” by Richard Rohr)

But here is the good news bad news. When we follow the True Vine, the True Christ, there will be:

## 2) TRUE CHANGE

When we know our master, we know our mission. When we are grafted into the TRUE VINE, who is Jesus Christ, when we are really connected to Him, from where all of our nourishment, wisdom, and strength come, there will be spiritual growth, and with growth comes change. Change is the only constant in life, and we normally hate change.

Here is the interesting thing about change. Pamela Mitchell, founder of The Reinvention Institute that studies change, says that when there is change in our life, the brain actually fights against it! Imagine that. We want to stick with what we have always done. We want to stay with the safest bet. And our brain says fight it. Stay with what you only know.

But Mitchell has found that true health means true change, and I would say that the Christian faith always talks about reinvention and transformation. When we follow God, guess what? Change will and must happen if we are to be transformed. We must do new things a new way according to the Holy Spirit.

Some of the most healthy, spiritual people in the world are those who allow God to reinvent themselves five or six times in a lifetime. Jesus says to Nicodemus that you must be born again. Being Born Again means transformation. We may think that only happens when we first convert.

But when we convert it should set off a chain reaction of change that will never end.

Pamela Mitchell discovered that if we can fight the urge not to change, when we slip out of our comfort zone, we will in the end be happier and more fulfilled and we get closer to our destiny. She said that you need to “retrain your brain.” She said, “Reinvention requires treading new territory, but we are hardwired to push back against the unfamiliar. And every time we fall into our comfort zones, it’s tougher to make dreams happen ...”

The healthy Christian is tied into the True Vine and we then become the branches. But healthy branches shouldn’t be stifled or contained but rather always be open to change, reinvention, and transformation or your branch will wither and die. We may hate change, but if we truly follow Jesus then we need to know that following God...is unpredictable and will take us out of our comfort zone.

There is that great scene in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe* when Mr. Beaver is talking to Lucy, Susan and Peter. Mr. Beaver is trying to explain to them what Aslan the Lion is like, and if you are a C. S. Lewis *Chronicles of Narnia* fan then you know that Aslan represents Jesus in this children’s story. And here is what Mr. Beaver says about Aslan when asked if he is a safe lion: “Safe?” said Mr. Beaver. “Don’t you hear what Mrs. Beaver tells you? Who said anything about safe? ‘Course he isn’t safe. But he’s good. He’s the King, I tell you.” (from *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*)

Following Jesus might not always feel safe but know that as our Lord and Friend and Savior He is good. And He is our King. Whatever path He leads us on, we must follow for it is better to be with Him than without

Him no matter how scary or adventurous.

We’ve got to fight against staying in our comfort zones. Jesus was always taking people out of their comfort zones. He took scared fishermen and made them courageous people even unto death. He turned Zacchaeus, an embezzler and swindler, into an honest philanthropist. He took Nicodemus, who was so into the law and legality, and made him a man of grace and mercy and of Jesus. He took Paul, who used to terrorize the church and kill Christians, and transformed him into the main early church planter and theologian of our New Testament today. That’s transformation!

Today you may be fighting a change, but if you follow Jesus you must be open to change all the time. Change is the only constant in life. What we have to be careful of is what Pamela Mitchell calls “the auto no” where people faced with change always say no, no, no. You can stop that addiction – No. You can stop watching porn. No. You can stop spending money. No.

The trouble is Jesus says life in His vine brings forth NEW WINE. It’s a new way of thinking and behaving, and new wine cannot be put into brittle, old, firm wineskins or else they will burst and break.

Some of you today have been caught off guard by an illness or a job change or the loss of a loved one. A horrible change! But follow Jesus. He is good. He is our king. He will be with you in the change. He is taking you on a new adventure, building the new you. We must always be open to change.

This church is amazing. You have been so open to change. Soon after I became the senior pastor of our church back in 1994, we had about 300 in the congregation.

**T**hen it got smaller, as small as 175 in one Sunday worship service. But then it grew. Hundreds came to Christ. And you all in faith to Jesus were open to change. We changed how we worshipped. We changed the location of where we worshipped. Today we now own and operate a restaurant downstairs and a golf course and a conference center. We changed denominations because the other one was like an old wineskin that was hindering our ministry. Well done!

But what is the vision for the next year? We must be open to other changes that the Lord might be asking us to do. He is always on the move leading us like with a pillar of smoke by day and a pillar of fire by night, always going on to the next Promise Land, and there is no getting to a Promise Land and resting as Joshua had to then fight 35 kings in a row. Talk about change and then more change.

People often use Jesus as a security blanket and want to be Christian couch potatoes and not want change and just want “soft security.” But Jesus pushes us out of our comfort zone to be on the courageous adventure of like helping the poor or the disadvantaged like we will be doing on Do Justice Saturday, or serving children like in Sunday School or in youth ministry or maybe having a career change.

Jesus is kind but He is not safe in the sense that He wants you to be a spiritual Indiana Jones doing great ministry with Him. I can truly say that if you are truly open to what Jesus has for you – it will be an adventure like you could never dream of.

Even in tragedy – the mother who lost a child due to a drunk driver starts MADD – Mothers Against Drunk Driving, the largest nonprofit working

to protect families from drunk driving, drugged driving and underage drinking and supports victims and survivors at no charge. God took a tragedy and redeemed a mother to save others. Good change in the midst of bad change.

If you are really connected to the True Vine, you won't need false gods. You won't need unhealthy entertainment. Life with Jesus is so much on the front lines that it will be exciting and fulfilling as long as you are doing what He wants you to do and not listening to the false gods.

False gods will say work harder, do more because God doesn't love you as you are. Jesus says, “God loves you as you are, but follow Me for an adventure, and you will see miracles and signs and wonders.”

Remember the old movie *Dances with Wolves* with Kevin Costner who plays Lt. John Dunbar who goes out into the wilderness by himself and helps both Indians and white people. I liked two marketing lines about the film. It read: “Lt. John Dunbar is about to discover the frontier....within himself. Inside everyone is a frontier waiting to be discovered.”

Part of true change is realizing there is a frontier inside of you that needs a guide. Jesus will help you discover and care for your soul if you let Him and stop fighting change. When you follow Jesus, when you are grafted into His Vine, you are grafted into a community. There are branches. We are in this together.

I see a church grafted into the True Vine, a church who authentically is on the journey in their own frontier who is open to change and transformation. And this leads to the final point: from the True Vine to true change and finally to true community because there are no lone rangers to true community

### 3) TRUE COMMUNITY

It is in community that our present church vision statement comes to life, which is “help people find their destiny in Jesus Christ.” What's our destiny as a person and as a community?

The two greatest days in your life are when you were born and the day when you know why? Were we just born to be a couch potato for the rest of our lives? Or were we born for grander reasons?

Going through a tough time? Then like the founder of MADD – turn that scar into a star for good. I do believe that it does take a village to raise a child, and it also takes a village to help one another find one's destiny – whether it's the right mate, master or mission. We can't do that on our own.

It is in true community that we help each other with our blind spots. It is in true community that we can be authentic and admit that we don't have all the answers. It is in community that we help each other find our destiny. It is in community that we support each other's faith. It is in community that we discover that: more eyes, clearer vision.

It's in community that we share things with each other, worship with one another, learn about one another, and serve one another and those in our city. It's in community that we come together in Communion because in this sacrament we admit we have faults, we have sin, and that we are powerless to make the changes needed in our lives without Jesus and we are grateful for what Christ has done for us and through us. (Pastor Dan then led the congregation to Communion.)

