

## THE BREAD AND THE VINE

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Consider with me this morning the symbols that are so prominent in the Communion — namely the Bread and the Vine — for it is the fruit of the vine that Jesus refers to in that first celebration of the Lord's supper. Both have a prominent role in the history of the Bible and both symbols are stressed in the Gospel of John, where Jesus identifies Himself as the bread of life and the true vine.

Let us first consider the bread. It is the staff of life, the very basis of human nourishment. It was carried in an unleavened form in the hasty flight from Egypt. When supplies failed in the wilderness, God provided manna from heaven to keep His people from starving. Jesus tells us in the Gospel of John, 6:48, that He is the bread of life. Unlike the material sustenance of manna which fed the people for only a time, Jesus calls Himself the living bread which came down from heaven, the bread that feeds the spirit into everlasting life.

I think it is important to understand this scripture metaphorically, as a figure, not literally. For the passage in John, literally taken, suggests the traditional doctrine that one is actually eating the flesh of Christ in the Communion, and this is not only unacceptable in Baptist tradition but also representative of a primitive mode of religious thinking out of keeping with the lofty spirit of the Gospel of John. To take this literally would be like taking the statement, "I am the door of the sheep" as a literal identification of Jesus with the physical gate of a sheep pasture. Clearly Jesus is the point of entry to the way, the truth, and the life — but no swinging gate to an ethereal pasture, and just as clearly He is the means of man's attaining spiritual sustenance and the power of the spirit — but this involves no literal eating of the God. It is a remembrance, and a spiritual identification. As Paul said to the church at Corinth (10:16), "When we break the bread, is it not a means of sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body." Sharing in the bread is celebrating the spiritual unity of those who are committed to the gospel of Christ — it is not eating His flesh.

It is in this spirit of appreciation of the metaphorical significance of the bread that the early church liked to meditate on the meaning of the Communion. Two themes were contrasted: brokenness and wholeness, separation and oneness. They meditated on the making of the bread — first, the grinding of the wheat and they saw this as symbolic of suffering, the suffering of Christ, or the grinding experience of suffering in our own lives, when we feel ground down by toil or trouble, fragmented, torn and divided. But then they meditated on the leaven of the spirit of faith and saw how the leaven transformed the ground grain into a new being, a useful and attractive source of sustenance symbolizing the bread of life. This represented, too, the wholeness of the church, as Paul taught — when we break the bread are we not sharing in the body of Christ? Because there is one loaf, we are one body, many as we are.

But further, the breaking of the bread symbolized the breaking of the body of Christ in the crucifixion, yet with the understanding that this is made whole by the power of the resurrection.

In terms of the church, as the body of Christ, it is suggested that it must be broken up in different tasks, different ministries, different roles, but all united in the service of the creative spirit of God. The metaphor of the bread teaches that it must be broken into individual bits if it is to nourish the members — so the church cannot nourish the world until it is broken into different acts of service, as individuals witness to their faith in Christ in their various walks of life.

In the spirit of this figure, we bring to the table of the Lord bread broken in remembrance of Christ. And we bring ourselves with broken hopes, shattered dreams, divided aims, and weakened energies — in the urgent faith that we can emerge, thanks to the leaven of the Spirit and the mystery of the Presence, restored, whole, renewed. This is the living bread, the bread of life, which we celebrate in the Communion.

Then there is the wine, the fruit of the vine, and we come to perhaps the most important image in the Gospel of John: “I am the true vine,” says Jesus, “and you are the branches.” As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it is connected with the vine, no more can we bear the fruits of faith unless we abide in, connect, relate to, identify with Christ. “For without Me,” says Jesus, “you can do nothing.”

Now the vine is an old symbol for Israel. It is portrayed beautifully in the 80th Psalm where we read, “Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt; thou didst drive out other nations and plant it; thou didst clear the ground before it, so that it made good roots and filled the land.” Israel is the vineyard of God. “The vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel,” says Isaiah. “I planted you a choice vine,” says Jeremiah. Ezekiel likens Israel to a vine. And the vine actually became the symbol of Israel. It was the emblem on the coins of the Maccabees. The temple had a great golden vine as an ornament before the Holy of Holies, and many an important person provided gold to mould new grapes to the vine. The vine was the very symbol of Jewish identity.

It is in this context that we must understand Jesus saying, “I am the true vine.” For the curious fact is that whenever we find reference to the symbol of the vine of Israel in the Old Testament, there is the suggestion of a degeneration of the original planting. The point of Isaiah’s picture, as read in the scripture lesson, is that the vineyard has gone wild. Jeremiah complains that the nation has become degenerate and turned into a wild vine. And the Psalmist, after describing how richly the vine grew, asks, “Why hast thou broken down the wall round it so that every passer-by can pluck its fruit?” So when Jesus says, “I am the true vine,” He is saying: the old vine of Israel is degenerate; being a Jew does not make one a branch of God; and one might say being a church member doesn’t make one a branch of God. Only a new relationship to God through Christ will save. The branch needs the true vine to reach the source of being and life which is in God.

The problem lies in the fact that the children of Israel forgot their relationship to God. The warning is clear in Deuteronomy 8th where it is stated that God has led His people to the land of promise and plenty, yet the temptation is to feel when one has prospered, when one has eaten and is full, and built good houses, and dwelt therein, and has herds that have multiplied, and silver and gold — the temptation is to say, “My own energy and strength have gained me this wealth”,

forgetting that the Lord God gives us strength to become prosperous, to endure. The vineyard of Israel grew wild as it forgot its source in its planting by God.

And so we understand the imagery of the true vine. Apart from our relation to the source of our being, we are nothing. Apart from the vine, the branches wither. And generations have sought to separate themselves from God and still flourish. But the branch cannot bear fruit of itself. Broken off from the source of our being — separated, fragmented, alienated — we cannot express the spirit of life, create anymore, enjoy our being as children of God.

There is more to the imagery of the parable of the vine. Jesus Christ is the vine; we are the branches. Through His spirit we have contact with God, the source and sustenance of our being. But God plays a dual role — He is also the vinedresser. “I am the true vine,” says Jesus, “and my Father is the vinedresser” or the husbandman or the gardener.

You see, what is needed for the branch is not only the contact, the connection, the intermediary with the source of our being for sustenance and life. What is needed as well is the training, the discipline, the pruning to keep the vine from going wild. The vine grows luxuriantly and drastic pruning is essential. A young vine is not allowed to fruit for the first three years, and each year is cut back to develop roots. When mature, it bears two kinds of branches: one that bears fruit and one that does not. The branches that do not bear fruit are pruned back so that they will not sap the strength of the plant needlessly and for no purpose. Further, the wood of the vine is worthless; it is too soft to work as wood. It was not even permitted as an offering of wood to the Temple for altar fires. It was fit only to be burned as trash. All of this adds to the parable of the vine.

I am not that committed to old-time Calvinism to read off the obvious conclusion — separated from Christ, cut off from God, purged because they could bear no fruit, certain branches — and even those from young shoots — are doomed to the destruction of fire by the pruner, to hell-fire by God. I know that John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim’s Progress, said, “I do not doubt that the floor of Hell is crawling with infants.” But I would rather read this parable as judgment against the unworthy, the fruitless, the parasitical spirit in the individual spirit. If I have trouble with double pre-destinarianism, I have even more trouble with the Universalist spirit that it is the business of God to save everyone, no matter what sort he is. It is like the caucus race in Alice in Wonderland, the race in which everyone has won and everyone must have a prize. Life is not like that, nor, I think, in the justice of His love is God.

But this message is clear: as the branch cannot bear fruit except it abide in the vine, so we cannot bear spiritual fruit cut off from Christ. Further, when we seem to be flourishing with the might of our own hands only to find by some accidental event that our whole world has come to an end, our whole enterprise lost, our dream gone like a puff of smoke — perhaps it is the vinedresser at work, lopping off a rank development that can bear no real fruit in our lives. Perhaps like the grinding of the grain, the breaking of the bread, the lopping off of a branch of behavior, even though it be aimed at a dream of destiny — if that be separate from our being in God through Christ, then that pruning will be in the long run good for our souls. It is by testing, by pruning,

that we are disciplined to cut off the idle and offensive to let the creative and loving spirit of Christ be expressed in us as branches of the true vine.

And when we do so, there is that deep and abiding dwelling in the presence of God in Christ expressed by love. To abide in the love of God is the promise of the parable of the vine — the experience of the symbolism of the Communion. Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. And God's love is so great, He loved the whole world — for God so loved the world that He gave His only Son, that everyone who has faith in Him may have eternal life. This gospel of love is our promise: "If you keep My commandments," says Jesus, "you shall abide in My love." Keeping the commandments involves some discipline, some pruning of the wildness of our vines; but these things are promised, says Jesus, that His joy may be in us and our joy made complete.

This is the message of Communion. It involves broken bread and vines drastically pruned — but the wonder of the Communion is the love of God shining through, making whole what was broken, and bearing the fruit of the spirit in our lives centered in Christ. This is the commandment: as God so loved the world, as Christ laid down His life in love, let us love one another, abide in love, in the true vine — and so share the bread of life.