



Sample Sermon

**Delivered to Central Christian Church, Marshalltown and Ankeny Christian Church
March 3 and 10, 2019**

By Local Arrangements Chair Rev. Sue Woods

The Great Vine - John 15: 1-8 (General Assembly promo sermon)

(Credit to the Rev. Juan Carlos Huertas, Grace Community United Methodist Church in Shreveport, Louisiana, “Abiding Fruit” for the section in red.)

Who here would admit that they have a green thumb? During graduate school, I house-sat for a professor who did have a green thumb. Plants would bloom for her if she walked down the hall and glanced in their direction. We were good friends, so, when she went on a three-month sabbatical, she asked me to look after her house... including caring for her house plants: a fussy Boston Fern, an aloof orchid, and a tropical tree being held captive in Iowa. It was terrifying. I managed to keep them alive, if not recognizable, until she returned.

In my own home, I have made friends with a cactus who loves being ignored, a rather aggressive philodendron, and an anxious bush that is perpetually root-bound. Who’s terrified now?

About 15 years ago, Jerry and I had the privilege of traveling to London. He went there on business and I, an English major, went to look at British poets’ graves. (It’s a thing.) On one of my day-trips, I visited Hampton Court Palace, home to King Henry VIII whenever he wanted to escape London and/or the plague – basically the same thing.

Hampton Court has lots of hidden treasures, but one unexpected gem is The Great Vine – the largest and oldest grape vine in the world. It was planted over 250 years ago in 1768 by the Hampton Court Gardener, Lancelot “Capability” Brown. (Now, take a moment and imagine what you could accomplish if your nickname was Capability....!) The Great Vine is currently 13 feet around at the base and the longest branch is 120 feet, putting to the puny grape vines in Iowa to shame.

But what is most amazing about The Great Vine is not how old it is, or how big it is. The amazing thing is how it has grown. The Victorians believed the best way to grow plants was to put them in glass houses. So they enclosed the Vine inside a wooden and glass building. But as the Great Vine grew, it became so entwined around the wooden structure that the only way forward was to build another structure over top of the whole thing. There have been five or six greenhouses built one-on-top of the

other on that same spot over the past 250 years. Wooden beams and Vine branches essentially became one living thing and you couldn't tell where the wood ended and the vine began.

Abide in Me... as I Abide in You.

Early on, only royalty could enjoy the fruit from The Great Vine. Queen Victoria had the grapes sent to which ever castle she called home that week. Later, the harvested grapes were sent to nearby towns and sold to locals – a sort of snobbish Victorian Farmers' Market. Eventually, the harvest made its way to halfway houses, hospitals, and other places where people who needed to feel a little like royalty could enjoy some blessing.

Abide in Me... because you are my branches.

I'm not very good with plants. But I do know that you can graft desirable traits from one plant onto another. So if you want a maple tree that doesn't overflow your gutters with whirly-gigs, you buy an Autumn Leaf Maple, like we did last year. Or if you want stronger roots, or brighter flowers, you manage it by being selective about the kind of root you begin with.

I also know you have to be ruthless when it comes to gardening. Out go the weaker plants and all those pretty weeds. You divide so they can thrive. You chop and prune and dig. Frankly, I don't have the heart for it. And I hate spiders.

Or...maybe I just don't care that much for Abiding. I wonder if we have the patience to abide in **anything** anymore – to immerse ourselves wholly in something and allow it to captivate our hearts. At first, I want to say no. But then I watch people abide in their cell phones. Or I listen to people talk about sitting on their couch all weekend and binge-watching The Walking Dead. (Ironic, isn't it?) Then I realize that we ARE willing to Abide.

The things we spend our time doing, the activities that we engage in all speak to the things that hold our hearts. The things we attach ourselves to and wrap ourselves around become OUR rootedness. And those things do bear fruit – it just may not be the harvest we were hoping for. Pay attention to your smartphone notifications and you'll soon recognize where it is you are abiding.

If I'm honest, I have to admit that I'm not always abiding in Christ. Don't get me wrong, I abide. Oh boy do I abide – in quilting... and Game of Thrones... and saying that I'm going to relearn Spanish. (in English... I say it in English). But I may not be abiding in Christ.

So how can we all do a better job of Abiding in our spiritual rootedness? Maybe that Great Vine can teach us a thing or two.

At Hampton Court, the gardeners who tend to the Vine wrap the "dead" (or at least the no longer productive parts) of the Vine in a protective film. That's because the nourishment for the newer

parts of the Vine still flows through what looks to be dead. But the fruit no longer comes from those dead places. The gardeners *manage* the old so the new can thrive.

Sometimes in the church, we keep hoping for the dead stuff to bear fruit. Maybe we need to wrap some things up: **honor** what has served us well, **recognize** that those traditions are what allowed for growth in the past, **preserve** them, but **focus** our attention on the new—where the fruit is.

And if you ever go to London, you'll see that the Vine is never satisfied with staying hemmed in. Everything the Vine needed was right there, inside the greenhouse: sunshine, fertilizer, caring hands, good soil. But that was never enough for the Vine. It would not allow itself to be walled off from the world. Instead, it absorbed what was trying to enclose it and went outward.

The General Assembly of the Christian Church (the Great Vine of the Disciples of Christ) will be held in Des Moines, Iowa on July 20-24. People from across the United States, Canada, and beyond, will gather to immerse themselves in **worship** that lifts the soul, **stories** that touch the heart, **mission** that makes a difference, **conversation** and **business** that stretch your mind, **messages** that call you to action, and **connections** that remind you that God's family is bigger than any local congregation. The church is a Great Vine that will not be hemmed in.

I encourage you to consider being a part of the Greater vine of Christ. I am Chair for the Local Arrangements Committee, but there are many in this congregation who are helping. Raise your hand if you are helping tend The Great General Assembly Vine. (recognize)

There will be amazing worship every night and Wednesday morning at Wells Fargo Arena. Imagine a stadium of Disciples sharing at One Table, listening to inspiring music, and receiving words of hope and challenge. Leading worship will be some of the premier ministers of our denomination. You will never hear the gospel preached more fully or dramatically.

There will also be a variety of mission opportunities, including a Tiny House build for the homeless, volunteering at the local Food Bank and Central Iowa Shelter Services, a poverty simulation exercise, Meals from the Market (a partnership with the Des Moines Farmers' Market), an opportunity to knit blankets, and even a Dirty Disciple event.

In addition to participating in local missions, you can also learn what other congregations are doing to make a difference in their corner of the vineyard at the MissionFest: sort of like walking through the Varied Industries at the State Fair Grounds – except for churches.

Speaking of the State Fair – as hosts of this year's General Assembly, we want to be sure and show people a good time. So we formed a Good Times committee with lots of fun activities for people of all ages: an East Village Photo Scavenger hunt, Yoga along the River, morning bike rides, and our very

own Butter Chalice. Did you know the woman who sculpts the State Fair butter cow is a Disciple of Norwalk Christian Church?

How many here have ever been to a General Assembly? Can you take a moment to share what was your favorite part? (pass the mic)

All of this is to say that, after worship, there will be computer(s) set up in fellowship hall where you can register and volunteer. And if you volunteer to help, you can get a reduced rate – come ask me for the secret code... or ask me anything about GA.

Christ says, "Come and be grafted to me. I have strong roots. I have the DNA you need to be fruitful, alive, and to flourish. Christ offers himself as the Great Vine so that all of creation can flourish."

Now, imagine what that looks like! Imagine our growing so close to each other and to Christ, that you can no longer tell where one ends and where another begins.

Imagine a house being built over and around us all, like a Great Vine, encasing us so that we might be fruitful.

Imagine sending that harvest, the fruit of our holy labor, into a hungry world.

Imagine the Disciples of Christ as a Great Vine, living and being at one with that which supports and protects us.

It is my prayer today that we can begin a movement, a movement of people committed to being agents of reconciliation, committed to a movement rooted in Christ, a movement that allows for God's love to inhabit the world and be fruit for all – a movement for wholeness in a fragmented world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

John 15: 1-8 Jesus the True Vine

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

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. 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.

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.