

BRANCHING OUT
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May 2, 2021
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Based on John 15:1-8. Jesus-As-Mystic describes the disciples as The Garden of God.

Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?

This is the triumphant song of Jesus, presented in John's Gospel Lesson for the day.

Chapter fifteen finds us fully engaged in what scholars call "The Farewell Discourse" of Jesus: Jesus-As-Mystic, in direct communion with God, preparing his disciples for his death, urging them to continue this direct communion with God – and with *him* – even when he is no longer physically present with them.

"In truth," Jesus says to the disciples, "I am like a vine, with my Abba God as the gardener. When my branches do not bear fruit, God removes them. God even prunes my fruit-bearing branches, in order for the remaining branches to bear more fruit."

"As my students," Jesus says, "you have already been pruned through my presence – God's Word-Made-Flesh – among you."

The challenge comes as Jesus now prepares to die.

"I promise to remain connected with all of you," Jesus says, "even in my death. I urge all of you to remain connected with me. And through me, to God and to one another."

"Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself," Jesus says, "unless it remains intertwined with the vine, this community will need to remain intertwined with the Divine Presence you have known in me."

"Think of it this way," Jesus says, "as God's Divine Expression, I am like a vine – even in my death – with you my students as my branches. Branches do not have much power apart from the vine, but when they remain intertwined with the vine, enduring together for the long haul, the branches continue to bear fruit, season after season, in perpetuity."

"If, when I die," Jesus says, "this community we have formed together chooses to separate from the God you have known through me, then you will become like branches that have been separated from the vine. Without sustenance from your Source, what is vibrant and life-giving in this community will instead dry up and wither."

"Without sustenance from your source," Jesus says, "you will burn up and burn out, instead of bearing continual fruit, one season to the next, in perpetuity."

"As I prepare to die," Jesus says, "take this allegory of vine and branches to heart!"

"Not as a judgment," Jesus says, "but as a promise."

"If you, my beloved students, stay connected to your Source," Jesus says, "steadfast, enduring together for the long haul, over time you will find that everything your soul desires [not the trivial wants and needs of consumer culture, but the deep longings of your Gardener-God-given soul/ soil] will come to pass."

"Friends," Jesus says, "we *honor* our Abba-Gardener-God when we bear the fruit of intertwined Spirit-led community!"

Eight Meditations on "Branching Out"

"I am the vine," Jesus says. "You are the branches."

If God is our Gardener, does that mean God depends on us as much as we depend on God? That the Gardener cannot, in fact, BE a Gardener without the Garden?

[This is our first meditation]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what part of us is ready to bear fruit?

[This is our second meditation]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what part of us is longing to bear fruit, but is on hold until the Gardener God decides we are ready?

[This is our third meditation]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what part of us may feel as if it has been cut back too far?

[This is our fourth meditation]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what part of us is just biding its time until it is ready to bloom?

[This is our fifth meditation]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what part of us is no longer bearing fruit and needs to be pruned?

– OR –

What part of us is still bearing fruit but should still make way for new life to grow?

[This is our sixth meditation.]

If we are plants in God's good garden, what is God asking us to relinquish to the transforming flame of the Spirit?

[This is our seventh meditation.]

If we are plants in God's good garden, how do we need the vine of love to abide with us, to nourish us? How are we clinging to this vine?

[This is our eighth meditation.]

"I am the real vine," Jesus says. "You are the branches. God is the Gardener."

We are one community, abiding in love, bearing fruit, season after season, for healing of the world. Yes, there will be pruning, Jesus says, but you all (second person *plural!*) have already been pruned by the message I have spoken. Yes, there will be burning, Jesus says, but you all (second personal *plural!*) have already been on fire with the grace of my love.

If you stay connected to your Source, Jesus says, steadfast, enduring together for the long haul, over time you all (second person *plural!*) will find that everything your soil-rooted-soul desires will come to pass. And you will *honor* our Abba-Gardener-God, one good grape – or geranium or mint or strawberry – at a time!

Let the church say, Amen!