

**A Cross worth Seeking**  
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**A Sermon for Sardis Baptist Church**  
**John 15:9-17**  
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Lamar Williamson writes that relationships in John's gospel exist on two spatial planes: the vertical and the horizontal. Jesus has a vertical relationship with God, and the disciples a vertical relationship with Jesus. Jesus' love emanates in God-- it flows through Jesus and gives him the power to do God's good work. In the same way, Jesus' love, the same love bound up in the Father, flows through the disciples, and gives them the power to do God's good work also. The disciples have a horizontal relationship with one another – the love that Jesus offers them affects the way they live with and love one another.

John's gospel is also a story of transitions. An actor plays his/her part. Once his/her part is done, he/she steps away. And another player emerges to pick up the story line. John foretells the coming of One greater than him. And when Jesus arrives, John exits stage left. And his disciples follow Jesus. Andrew and Peter, Jesus' first disciples, pick up where John leaves off, and take an active role in recruiting new disciples. And when Jesus travels from town to town, he makes connections with new people: Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, a man born blind at birth, Mary and Martha and Lazarus, and many others. And when Jesus leaves these places, it's not him directly, but rather the testimony of those with whom he connects, that brings new believers his way.

And John's gospel is full of metaphors: the shepherd, the sheepfold, and the sheep; light shining in darkness; new life; new water that quenches thirst forever; wine, too; new eyes that bring sight; and in today's lection, a vine.

Jonathan described the metaphor of the vine to perfection last Sunday. Since I can't do better, I'll offer a very clumsy summary. If you need more details, please see Professor Eidson after class.

John 15 tells us that God is a vineyard keeper, the one who plants and tends the vines. In other words, God is the source of the vine. God offers life. Jesus is the vine, that is the stem, or backbone, of God's love – Jesus emanates directly from God. And it's from this vine, the largest branch, that other branches or tributaries extend, producing leaves and fruit. John says that we are the branches. We are beings connected to Jesus, supported by Jesus, equipped by Jesus to be the fruit of God's love.

Let me stop there, because I've thrown a lot at you in a short amount of time. To recap: John talks about vertical and horizontal relationships. John transitions characters from active to passive roles. And John loves metaphors.

Here's what I find fascinating about today's lection. Our reading is part of Jesus's farewell discourse to the disciples. And up to this point in the story, Jesus has prioritized vertical relationships, he's remained the active character, and he's made himself or his Father the hero of every metaphor. But that changes in today's lection.

“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants[d] any longer, because the servant[e] does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but

I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Translation: "You may not know it yet, but you are ready."

Jesus is no longer emphasizing the vertical plane of his relationship. He's no longer saying to the disciples that they are to Jesus, as Jesus is to his Father, or a servant is to his master. He's calling them friends. He's telling them they know everything they are supposed to. He's telling them that they are equipped to offer the kind of love to one another, that's he's offered to them, and his Father has offered to him. In other words, the relationship with Jesus and his disciples has become horizontal.

And like John before him, Jesus is preparing for what will come after him. He's saying, "Look, my time here is almost up. And before long, it's gonna be you who are doing what I'm doing now." Yes, there will be a resurrection, and mysterious appearances, and a rejoining of his friends, and eventually an ascension. But why is that we know the story some two thousand years later? It isn't because Jesus is an active narrator. It's because those whom he appointed to do his work, did it well. And those whom he appointed, appointed others. And so on and so on. Each remained active, until it was time for someone else to take up the mantle.

And what of this vine? How does a vine thrive? As Jonathan mentioned last week, branches are pruned, and tended. Those branches that remain connected to the source grow and thrive. And they create their own fruit. Sometimes they create seeds that turn into new vines. Sometimes a small piece of them is clipped, and replanted, becoming a separate vine. But they grow because they are healthy, connected to their source, using all of its nutrients to flourish. Jesus makes clear that the disciples are no longer persons who might bear fruit, but they are persons who are bearing fruit.

And how does this new fruit keep bearing fruit? It stays connected to the vine, and also to the fruit with whom it shares its space. This new fruit, the disciples, they love God and they love neighbor. And it seems to me, they form a cross, but not a scary cross like the one on Golgotha. This cross' base is vertical – a love rooted in God. And this cross' arms are horizontal – a love rooted in communion with others. And at the intersection of a cross, we find the kind of world Jesus told us was possible.

Because of what Jesus had done for her, Mary Magdalene channeled her love of God and of Jesus into the courageous witness of an empty tomb. Because of what Jesus had done for him, Peter channeled his love of God and of Jesus, into a new church, where members could heal others, and help them walk and leap and praise each day in the midst of God's love. Because of witnesses like Mary and Peter, a new church became rooted in God's love, and shared its belongings so that no neighbor had need.

These aren't stories of barren crosses or a single dangling grape. These are crosses full of life, standing in vineyards full of interconnected grapes, all living and breathing and growing and thriving together.

But here's the thing, Sardis Baptist Church, John's story is not some lifeless narrative, full of characters from long ago. When we read John's gospel, we are reminded of our active role in the vineyard, of our interconnectedness to God and neighbor, and of our ability, no our commandment, to go and bear additional fruit. It seems to me the narrative has found another congregation of people to take an active role in the story; to do as Jesus commands: Love one another.

And having just finished Carson Sholin's memorial service, I want to tell you that I got to see a unique perspective on what a vineyard looks like. Standing at the pulpit on Saturday, I looked out to see a hundred vines, each thriving, each connected by the life-giving spirit of a remarkable woman rooted in love for her Maker and for her neighbors. And then, I got to see all of her good grapes bearing more fruit in the company of one another as they offered memories, and songs, and prayers, and consoling words, and refreshments, and Arnold Palmers to one another. And then they left that place, ready to connect with other vines.

What Jesus tells the disciples today, and you and me as well, is that the vertical love we have for God, and God has for us, it's got arms. Horizontal arms. And if we are to be the vineyard God intends, we cannot be vines that only seek to shoot straight up. We've got to be vines that reach out and connect to, love on, thrive on one another.

I think that's a cross that's all about life. And I think it's a cross worth seeking. May we seek it. And may we seek it soon.

Amen.