

“Culture and Christ”  
Psalm 22:25-31;  
1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

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I doubt if you came this morning looking for a talk on viticulture, to hear about how to take care of a vineyard. And yet, that’s where we start. Jesus is inviting us to think about what it means to take care of a vineyard. He is inviting us, in many ways, to begin to think of ourselves as that vineyard, perhaps even as a branch in that vineyard, and what it takes to engage us, as parts of that vineyard, to be those branches that produce wonderful fruit.

There are a couple elements to the viticulture he describes that is what needs to happen in this vineyard to make it healthy and productive. One is that there’s pruning. Being pruned does not sound like a wonderful experience. And yet, he describes it as a way of taking out what is not useful and enabling us to grow more fully. The second thing he is talking about is the idea of abiding in the vine.

It’s an interesting thing because one of the reasons for a healthy vineyard is because the vinedresser is going to come and be helpful in engaging us in growing the best way we can grow. But then there’s this strange way of talking about the idea of abiding, because we don’t think of branches in a vineyard as having a choice about where they are. It feels like, as he begins to fill out this particular metaphor, he transitions into something else. He goes from viticulture to human culture. He begins to think about what it means for us and where we hang out, where we abide.

I mentioned that word, abide, last week. Looking it up again, the word that is translated “abide” is defined this way: *it is equivalent to not departing, not to leave, to continue to be present, to maintain unbroken fellowship with one.* It’s the idea of staying, hanging out, continuing to be present with. Jesus takes the vineyard idea and the vinedresser idea and give us some agency, some role to play in participating in what the vinedresser is doing. Instead of it just being about the viticulture, about the way the vinedresser cares for the vineyard, it starts to become about us, as people in the vineyard with a particular way of living. What’s our culture? What’s growing among us? What is growing in productive and unproductive ways?

I do think that it begins to point us toward thinking about what our culture is. We have all kinds of cultures, particularly if we don’t think about the overarching culture to begin with. There are folks who live in a fitness culture. Sometimes we talk about a drinking culture. Sometimes we talk about a sports culture or academic culture or work culture. In fact, I found a definition of organizational culture that I thought was helpful. It’s the collection of values, expectations, and practices that guide and inform all the actions of the team members.

I think that’s what Jesus means when he’s talking about where we hang out. We all know that where we hang out influences us. Parents, particularly, sometimes worry

about that with their children. Where do they hang out and what does that mean for what they are learning, how they are developing? Jesus is talking about where we hang out. Where do we abide? What is the culture of our place? What is the thing that sustains us, that grows us, that encourages us? Is it the vineyard of God, or is it something else?

It feels to me that when we think about this idea of organizational culture – the values, expectations, and practices – Jesus is inviting us to think about what that means, where we abide. What are the values, expectations, and practices of the place where we are abiding, where we're staying? As we begin to think about what it means to be in God's house, in God's vineyard, what are the values, expectations, and practices that we might expect to see?

In an organizational culture, oftentimes they talk about how the person or group that is leading the organization sets the tone, sets the culture. This passage invites us to think about how God sets the tone, how God sets the values, and where it begins. It said that God first loved us. God is setting the organizational culture. The economy of God's realm, the way of God's family, what's central to it, is love.

We need to remember what "love" means because we use love in so many different ways. I'm not going to spend a lot of time on this, but I'm going to suggest that this love that is defined here, the *agape*, that is the Greek word for love most common in the Bible, is the love that chooses to see the value in others as children of God, and therefore cares for that other. And if we follow Christ's example, is willing to sacrifice for the other. It is the choice to see the value of others as children of God, and then to care for them, to engage with them in care and compassion.

If this is what starts at the top, if this is what God is showing us, then that's what the culture that God is creating in God's organization is all about. It's the central idea of value. It's the central expectation. It's the practice that God wants to inculcate in his organization, in God's people.

As we go on in 1 John, it notes a couple of things. It notes that there are things that don't belong in God's culture. The first is that God's perfect love casts out fear. So in God's organization, in God's people, fear is cast out because what's central is God's love, and God's love casts out fear. It goes on to suggest that the other thing that is absent from God's culture, what is healed in us, is hate. How can one look at our fellow human beings and hate them? It's a clue that we're given about whether God's culture is at work or not.

If we are to live as children of God, we are called to live lives in which we recognize the love of God, the wonder of that love given us in Jesus Christ, who sacrifices to heal us, to make the relationship between us and God work again, then works to complete that ability to love in us. It feels to me that this whole description of us being taught to love – experiencing and knowing God's love as he first loved us and that engages us in love for God and love for one another – is central to the culture of God.

There are lots of ways to describe that. God's justice is a way of describing God's love for God's people. In reading through the Prophets, you will read over and over again the nature of God wanting a relationship that's right between humans and God, and between humans and humans. Love is central to that idea of God's justice.

So today, we are invited to be those who reflect God's love, to know the wonder of loving God and the importance of loving one another. We can't do one without the other because they are so tightly engaged. As I think about that, it feels to me that as God invites us to love one another, central to that is God's justice. So what I'm struggling with is the idea of social justice, which for me is about God engaging us in loving one another. When somebody tells me I can't use the idea of social justice, in my mind, I'm being told I can't express God's love in a just way, in a way where it is expressed to everybody in a society. I don't know what it means to have that taken away. It's what I stand on. Because what it does is raise a fear in me that I can't be the very disciple of Christ that I'm called to be. It does the opposite of what the culture of God does for me – the culture in which God loves first and invites me to find what it means to be in that relationship of love of God and to love my neighbors. It makes me see that fear and hate are red flags that help me see that we are losing sight of the love of God that we know through God's son sent into the world.

If we receive that healing love, that love that sacrifices self for us, we get to hang out with Jesus. It's the idea of abiding with God and abiding with God's people in a way that cleanses the fear and hate out of our lives. Fear and hate feel to me like those branches in our lives that are like the suckers in a tree that take the nutrients away from the main branch, or the water sprouts that take energy and take away from the ability of the rest of the tree to produce great fruit. So, I need fear and hate pruned out of my life. But it's not just out of my own life. It's out of our lives. It's our life together, for it is God's world.

Sometimes we tend to limit God's organization to the church or to some group of religious folk. But really, we are God's creation. We are God's world. God's culture is for all people. The invitation we have is to live in God's culture, in God's economy, in God's creation where we are invited to know that God loved us first and invites us to be those who return that love and share that love.

Reading 1 John is a little difficult sometimes. When I read those last verses, 1 John 4:19-21, it feels almost like a slap in the face. I love the fact that God first loved us, but... Let me read it:

*We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.*

I don't know about you, but that feels pretty rough to me. I don't like being called a liar, because I know I struggle sometimes with loving my brother and sister. I want to be one who loves God and loves my brother and sister.

We are lucky. We are fortunate. We are incredibly gifted by the grace of God who knows we struggle with that and yet invites us to be one family. He invites us to share at the table. He invites us to remember who sustains us, who is the lifeblood of our lives. I think that is the very grace of God. The love that God first shows us enables us to know we are sustained by God's grace and God's goodness. So we get to come to the table and be reminded that we get to hang out with God, with Jesus.

God has given us a family to hang out with in which we can practice doing and being the people that love God. We know the love of God and the way that defines the culture of God's organization, of God's people, and find that that love truly casts out fear and heals our hate.

Finally, love, then becomes the flavor of the produce. In wine, sometimes they talk about the *terroir*, that somehow you can taste the origin of the wine. I think that's what this is about. As we allow God to prune us, to cleanse us, to shape us, people will begin to experience that *terroir* of God, the very love of God that was the origin of it all. Amen.