

## “Grapes of Joy”

John 15:1-11

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It was a busy Friday night at Commander’s Palace, the Five-Star restaurant in the Garden District of New Orleans where I worked as a captain while attending Tulane University. At the doors to the Garden Room, there appeared a gigantic white Stetson hat, underneath which a large red-faced man was grinning. The Maitre-d’i sat his party down at one of my tables. “Good evening,” I said, smiling. “My name is Clinton, and I will be taking care of all your needs tonight. Would you like to see the wine list?” “I don’t need to,” the man loudly replied, grinning even more toothily. “Bring me the most expensive bottle you’ve got!” “That would be the ’53 Chateau Lafite-Rothschild,” I said, grinning rather toothily myself. “But I need to inform you, sir, that that vintage is priced at 1650 dollars.” “Bring it up!” he bellowed, as heads began to turn in the Garden Room. I rushed downstairs to get the General Manager and gather up a decanter, an elegant candle and the dusty bottle of wine which was two years older than I was. The Manager put his face in front of mine and said, “Roberts—if you screw this up you’ll be out on your can tonight!” “Yessir,” I gulped.

Our entrance back into the Garden Room with the Lafite-Rothschild, the lit candle and a crystal decanter all balanced on my shoulder as I was followed by my two waiters looked more like a religious procession than anything else, as all eyes turned to observe the decanting—now including the steely gaze of Miss Ella Brennan, the restaurant’s owner. I mouthed a silent prayer: “Please, God—don’t let the cork crumble!” Somehow, I managed to decant the old bottle successfully, and it was joyfully and noisily consumed. The year was 1981, and times were good in Texas. A couple of years later, times weren’t so good—but by that time I wasn’t decanting fine wine at Commander’s Palace anymore. That branch had been removed. Now I was learning to decant the very best: the Wine of the New Covenant, poured out for all of us that Good Friday—the wine that is precious and priceless and free.

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When Jesus was with his closest followers on the night before his death, his overriding purpose was to “love them to the end,” as it states in John 13. So he stooped to wash their feet. He promised them the Comforter, the Spirit of truth. And he assured them that he would never leave them—he would come back for each of them, that they might be with him always. Then he gave them this teaching: the final “I am” saying of the Lord. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” he said to them. “Abide in me and I will abide in you. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Now 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine would have been dotted with vineyards—as were the Old Testament scrolls of Hosea, Isaiah, Jeremiah and the Psalms. This metaphor used by Jesus to describe the nature of his relationship to his disciples would have been simply and clearly understood. Yet in many ways, Jesus saved the best for last—like he did at the wedding in Cana when he turned the water into wine. The connection between the vine, the branches and the grapes is so strong, and so powerful, it cannot be misunderstood. The vine is there to uphold and nourish the branches. And the branches cannot bring forth grapes without the life-giving power of the vine. Cut off, they will wither. Cut off, they will die.

My wife Deb isn't a vinedresser like God is described in our passage. But she is a gardener. Which means she owns a pair of shears. Yesterday, she went to work on the Hydrangea bushes adorning the front of the Manse. She filled up a couple of yard bags with her clippings! I'm sure if those Hydrangea bushes could speak, they'd be saying, "Ouch!" But the end result? Those plants will grow to bear even more beautiful blossoms than before.

The same holds true for us, our Lord is saying. But the fruit he is speaking of isn't blossoms or grapes, it is spiritual fruit like kindness and gentleness, generosity and faithfulness, patience and loving, and in this teaching—joy.

Reflecting on my life, I can certainly identify those moments when God's shears were at work on me: pruning away my destructive behaviors and cutting back my misplaced priorities. Most of the time God used clippers, but other times, I have to admit God needed a chainsaw. At the time, it was very painful—an experience of failure and loss. But over time, the opposite held true: my life became more God-directed and less self-directed, more loving, more gracious, more life-affirming, and more fruitful. How about you? Can you look back at your own life this morning, and see how our Gardener God has dressed your branches, leading you to grow more toward the sunlight and less toward the dirt? Can you see how God has brought forth the blessings in your life—the fruit that will last? I know that you can, because I know that our God is faithful. God's actions are good and righteous altogether, and like a fine bottle of wine, God wants us too to get better with time.

One last thing about vineyards: the best of wines are often produced from the poorest of soils—not in four feet of topsoil like central Illinois, but on some rocky hillside on the edge of the desert, where conditions are harsh and dry. And not only that, but when a vine is injured or damaged, experiencing great heat and drought, its grapes often become even more delicious: more concentrated, intense and flavorful, producing the best vintage of all.

I know people like that: people who are intimately acquainted with hardship, trouble and sorrow, yet carry within them redolent riches of wisdom and modesty, generosity, goodness and grace. "O taste and see that the Lord is good!" their lives proclaim. These beautiful people are like grapes of joy.

#### Conclusion

Friends, at your baptism, Christ promised to live in you. Have you responded likewise? Have you endeavored to live in him? There is no more important decision you can make that to stay connected...to stay in Christ, the True Vine, no matter where, no matter how, no matter what! He is the Servant who has come to take care of all our needs, because he is the life that is truly Life. His purpose in teaching his followers these things on the night before he poured out his own life was so that our lives might bring forth grapes of joy. "I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may overflow." Friends, isn't this the vintage we should now be sharing, along with all other gifts of the Spirit? Because we're meant to stay connected, too. And this is how we do that. Because this is the Cup of our Salvation--which is joyful, and priceless, and free.