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June 25, 2017

**Series: Great Hymns of the Faith**  
**Sermon: I Need Thee Every Hour**

**John 15:4-5**

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

**Sermon**

I come from a long line of farmers. One side of my family are craftsmen, the otherside, farmers. I'm talking square miles of farms. A plethora of acres. My great great grandpa, who lived till he was 103, gave each of his kids their own full fledged farms. Thats a lot of land. Thats a lot of crops. Fast forward several generations. I am not a farmer. Want to know why I'm not a farmer? Because deep down, I really don't know much about farming. I can drive a tractor, or a combine. I know some phrases like, corn should be knee high by \_\_\_\_\_. (The fourth of July). But if I got a farm I wouldn't know what to do with it. I don't know how to plant, cultivate, harvest. Our little garden in our backyard is generally weeks by the end of the season. We don't have green thumbs, we have the black thumb of death. Don't ask us to care for your houseplants. They're on their own. In our house, how do you kill a plant? Give it to mom. I'm not a farmer. Its in my blood, but not my skill sets.

And so I don't really get the imagery and the metaphors of Jesus we find in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of John. I am the Vine. You are the branches. I don't know much about vines. Most of the vines around here we want to get rid of. We have vines behind our shed that if I don't whack pretty soon, it will take over the shed and the neighbors fence. Our neighbors must love us.

But I know, plant a seed, you get a plant. From that seed you will get a new vine or a new tree, and eventually fruit. Right? Wrong! Or sort of right and wrong. Works for corn, not so much for vines. If you want a strong vine or tree, and if you want to get a decent amount of fruit from either, then you don't go about it by planting a seed. You might strike it lucky of course. But the chances of doing so are actually very low. The seed will grow, but the plant you get won't be true to type. Plant a seed from a nice sweet grape and you are just as likely to get a vine with grapes which are sour and bitter. So, what do the expert vine and fruit growers do? The answer is they bring two different plants together and join, or graft, one into the other. You use the roots of one plant and the top growth or branches from another. According to the Royal Horticultural Society web site this grafting is a complicated and quite lengthy process. They suggest no less than 11 stages which you have to go through in order to get it to work. But essentially it is making a cut in the root stock and inserting into that cut the sharpened end of the branch. And then you tape them together and eventually they grow together into one plant. For a decent crop of fruit the advice is graft two plants together, or buy them from a garden center in that way, or save yourself a lot of time and just go to Fred Meyers and get your fruit.

And so onto our reading from John's gospel today. Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. John's gospel contains seven of these sayings by Jesus, which begin ‘I am’. ‘I am’... the bread of life; the light of the world; the door of the sheep; the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the way, the truth and the life; and lastly - the very last one, I Am the true vine.

The author of John's gospel uses these words to describe who Jesus is and what he offers to those who believe

in him. 'I am the true vine' is the seventh and last of these sayings. Now as we know a good picture or image is extremely powerful in getting an idea across and helping it be remembered. We have the perfect example of that. 'I am the vine: you are the branches' Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. No obtuse or hidden meaning here. What could be easier to understand? Pastor Mike, we get it, Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches. So of course, the answer is for us to be grafted onto Jesus. You take us, you take Jesus, graft us together, and the result is fruit. Sermon's done, we can beat the Lutherans to Biscuits. AND I SAY "NOT SO FAST!"

That's where I was going, until I realized where we were in the Bible. We're in John, 15<sup>th</sup> chapter. So what? I hear you ask. In John 14, is the last supper. Almost at the end of the passion week. For three years, the Disciples and Jesus have been palling around, village to village, spreading the good news. The Disciples, 12 of them, didn't realize that the game was about to change. They didn't know that this was to be the end. They might have been thinking about next week, next month, next year, what tribe is Jesus going to next? But this Passover was different. One of their own leaves the company. One of their own leaves the dinner, quitting the ministry. Not only leaving and quitting, but tattle tailing to the authorities. Of course, that's Judas. And off he goes. Their 12 is now 11. We know the story of Judas, his betrayal of Jesus and treachery for the 30 pieces of silver. But this was news to the Disciples! All they know is that Judas is gone! He and Jesus got into it. Drama. And after the Passover, they left the upper room, and off they went to . . . where did they go? Where did they go after the passover meal, where Jesus was arrested? The Garden of Gethsemane. John 14 ends at the dinner with the line, "Come now, let us leave." They are leaving the upper room. And it's not till Chapter 18, four chapters later, that we get to the Garden. It took four chapters for that short walk. Chapter 18 starts by "They crossed the Kidron Valley. On the other side was a grove of olive trees, Jesus and his disciples went into it." So what happened during these chapters in between? Jesus talked. And talked and talked. The Disciples are still in shock over what just happened with Judas. And with the strange words that Jesus shared at this particular Passover. This is my body, this is my blood. It was not a normal meal. If you have a red letter Bible, where Jesus' words are in red, this section is splotted in color all over the place. And just as they are reaching the garden - I can imagine that Jesus did what I do for children's time. Sometimes at Children's time, I look around and think, hmmmm. What can I say today to the kids. Do I have a prop? Can I share eternal truths with what something hanging around here? And so I picture Jesus, about to walk into this garden and I can just imagine him thinking, hey I know what I can say! Here's a perfect object lesson! Let's talk about vines! We're surrounded by vines. We're walking thru crops. And with Judas' departure so fresh, just moments ago, we have Jesus sharing, and I'll read a larger portion than what we had today: "I am the true vine. My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch joined to me that does not bear fruit. He trims every branch that does bear fruit. Then it will bear even more fruit. . . Remain joined to me, and I will remain joined to you." And he goes on to say that branches that don't produce fruit are cut and thrown into the fire. The section ends with loving each other, no greater love hath this: That one lays down one's life for a friend. Here is my command, Love one another. At the entrance to the garden, with sorrow of the loss of one of their own, they get this image of vines and fruit - along with some of the favorite sayings of Jesus that last throughout these ages. Graft onto him, and you'll be OK.

That fits well with today's hymn, I Need Thee Every Hour. It sounds like a hymn of desperation and want. I NEED THEE. NEED, NEED, NEED. We Christians are a needy bunch. So I imagined that this hymn was born out of great sorrow, pain or anguish. Jesus, I need thee - not once a week, once a year. But Every Hour! Sounds clingy.

But that's not what it was at all. This hymn was written by Annie Sherwood Hawks. She was born in New York, 1835. By the age of fourteen, Hawks was writing poems that were being published in a variety of newspapers. In 1859, she married Charles Hawks and focused on raising their three children. Dr. Robert Lowry, a prominent writer of gospel songs, was her pastor at Hanson Place Baptist Church in Brooklyn, N. Y. Lowry encouraged her gift of poetry. Dr. Lowry promised her that if she wrote the words, he'd write the music. I Need Thee Every Hour was written in June 1872. Hawks writes - these are her words now, "One day as a young wife

and mother of 37 years of age, I was busy with my regular household tasks during a bright June morning. Suddenly, I became so filled with the sense of nearness to the Master that, wondering how one could live without Him, either in joy or pain, these words were ushered into my mind, the thought at once taking full possession of me — ‘I Need Thee Every Hour. . . . Seating myself by the open windows, I caught up my pencil and committed the words to paper.’”

Some hymns are born out of adversity. Or pain. Or struggle. This one was born out of doing laundry. On a beautiful day. Happy with life. Happy with her family. She took the poem to Lowry, who added the refrain and music to the poem. Mrs. Hawks continued by explaining “For myself, the hymn, at its writing, was prophetic rather than expressive of my own experiences, for it was wafted out to the world on the wings of love and joy, instead of under the stress of great personal sorrow, with which it has often been associated.”

The fact that “I Need Thee” is repeated 20 times throughout the hymn. Years later, after the death of her husband, she reflected on the power of her song: “I did not understand at first why this hymn had touched the great throbbing heart of humanity. It was not until long after, when the shadow fell over my way, the shadow of a great loss, that I understood something of the comforting power in the words which I had been permitted to give out to others in my hour of sweet serenity and peace.” Hawks wrote over 400 hymn text, but I Need Thee Every Hour is the only one sung today.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. It’s still true - I can’t farm - but then again, I’m just a branch. Asked to produce good fruit. Through good times and bad, if we graft onto him, we’ll be OK. And the family of God say, AMEN.