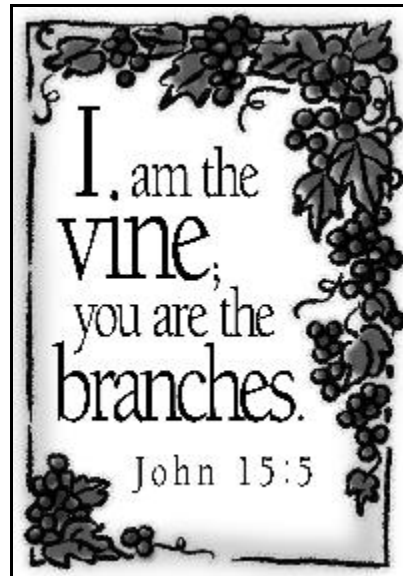


LIVE THE VINE LIFE!



Scripture:

Psalm 22:25-31

²⁵From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

²⁶The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever!

²⁷All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the LORD; and all the families of the nations shall worship before him. ²⁸For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.

²⁹To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust, and I shall live for him. ³⁰Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord, ³¹and proclaim his deliverance to a people yet unborn, saying that he has done it.

John 15:1-8

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

This is the Word of the Lord! Thanks be to God!



This imagery of the vine and the branches is all around us here in Sonoma County! But how do we live the vine life? Or this sermon could be titled Live the "Divine" Life!

The word "Divine" literally means, "of the nature of God." Do you know anyone who lives as if they are living their life with a natural way of reflecting the love of God to the world?

I have an amazing friend like that whom I met many years ago. She happened to be the wife of our head pastor at National Presbyterian Church. Her name is Colleen Townsend Evans but we always call her “Coke.” She wrote a book called *The Vine Life*. It was very popular back in the sixties. And her words still apply to our lives today.

COKE AND LOUIE EVANS

Has anyone heard of Coke and Louie Evans? They had quite the Hollywood love story! Colleen was originally Colleen Townsend. She was a real star in Hollywood at about the same time Marilyn Monroe was becoming famous, too. They were friends at one time. “When Willie Comes Marching Home” was the most famous movie where Colleen Townsend had a major role. Here is Coke’s image on Life magazine back then, and it is still available on eBay today.

Louie and Coke met at Hollywood Presbyterian Church while he was home on break as a San Francisco Theological Seminary student. Coke knew if she was to be with Louie she would have to choose between being a church pastor spouse and being a Hollywood movie star. The two would not mix well.



Coke didn’t hesitate long to decide after Louie asked her to marry him. She said yes and gave up her movie career immediately, devoting all her life to what she called The Vine Life. Coke truly believed that her faith and deep connection to Jesus as a vine and herself as a branch

was much more important than all the fame and fortune that Hollywood offered.

Louie and Coke soon founded the Bel Air Presbyterian Church after they were married. They started that church in their own home.

NATIONAL PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

It was when they were serving in Washington DC at National Presbyterian Church that I met Louie and Coke. Coke led our Presbyterian Women’s Bible study and she always made sure there was childcare for the children so young Mom’s like me could participate. They had a lovely home just a few blocks from the Capitol and their four children, three boys and a girl, were very involved in their lives as well.

In her book, *The Vine Life*, Coke wove her life and faith into every page. Her book explains how to live with God as your center and roots while your eyes and ears are always looking for ways to serve and help others.

She also describes the influence a peer group has on your life since we are all interconnected. Louie and Coke had some famous peers such as Ronald Reagan, Billy Graham, Roy Rogers, Dale Evans and Jane Russell. They were all in a Bible study together in the early fifties.

After moving to Washington, D.C. their peers were congress-people and ambassadors who attended church there. And of course, Pastor Louie and Coke included some “common folks” like me and my family, too.

THE TRUE VINE

The Vine Life concept that Coke developed in her book came from this passage I read in John 15. Coke and Louie led what might have seemed to be “charmed” lives. But they never acted as if they were above others and they powerfully embraced social justice, including the civil rights movement. They advocated for the poor and ethnically oppressed even when others did not agree with them and they lost a

few members of the church they started in Bel Air over their participation in desegregation of schools and housing.

Coke believed that leaving Hollywood probably saved her life after she saw what it did to her friend, Marilyn Monroe. She felt the choice to be a partner in ministry with her husband was the better path to follow and she never regretted that choice. Coke believed the fruit they were able to bear for the church was much more important than the fame she might have received in Hollywood.

MAKING A CHOICE

Have you ever had to make a choice between your faith and fame and fortune? It doesn't have to be such a huge choice like that Coke made, but I'm sure there has been some place and time in your life when you had to choose between abiding in your faith in the vine or following the path of dead branches.

A few years ago, in college, I had to choose whether I wanted to be connected to a healthy fruitful branch versus a withering branch that included some of my friends who were indulging in marijuana and experimenting with other drugs. My friends that were beginning to wither were getting distracted and losing their motivation to attend classes and show up at their jobs. Since I had personally witnessed the withering self-destruction my brother experienced from drugs and alcohol when he returned from the war in Vietnam with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, I understood the consequences of not abiding in Jesus who wants us to be healthy and whole. When we truly abide in Jesus we do not do things that are self-destructive. We become role models in the faith so that others who see God's love in action through us will want to live the vine life, too.

A DIVINE LIFE

It is truly a Divine Life when you focus on keeping God's commandments and live your life in a way that promotes, peace, justice and love. Remember Jesus boiled down the commandments to two:

1. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and
2. Love your neighbor as yourself.

Loving the Lord your God in this vine life way means you keep God in the center of your life, learning how to develop a closer relationship on a daily basis. That can be done through Bible study, meditation/prayer time, and devoting your time to the life of the church. When your life includes promoting the love of God as your sense of purpose, then your life is a vine life.

And when you seek to love all your many and different kinds of neighbors as yourself, you are living The Vine Life that reminds you we are all one and all connected.

Walt Whitman once reflected on the loving neighbors as yourself command. He said, "I celebrate myself and sing myself, And what I assume you shall assume, For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you."

SCIENTIFICALLY SPEAKING

Scientifically speaking, invisible dark matter that connects us to each other and to the universe is like a vine that interweaves all around us with God as its center. Since the discovery of fractals it isn't too wild to think that there is a pattern that is vine-like connecting everything together. These patterns are everywhere in nature, out in space, and inside our bodies, too.

Scientist, Dr. Arundhati Mukherjee said, "Fractals, which are branchlike patterns, easily connect to other systems—a literal web of life. A tree with many fractal branches can better connect to the sun (and soil) to gather and exchange life sustaining nutrients."

He goes on to say: "**Science appears to be nearing a period of neo-vitalism, with scientifically grounded ways of exploring the attractive worldview of our root-civilizations—that everything in life is connected and that all of the universe is alive within these connections.**"

The Vine Life is a life very aware of the gift of life each day, not just your own life but the gift of other's lives around you as well. We all are on this earth trying our best to bear good fruit, to have a purpose, and a life that is meaningful and to leave a legacy of good for the next generation.

When we fall off the branch and find ourselves despairing or in self-destructive patterns, we feel disconnected from God and one another.

But the vine-grower doesn't leave us on our own to rebuild the vine. God provides a way back onto the branch and never gives up on us even when we need to prune away some of our bad habits that are hurting ourselves and others.

After today's pericope (section of the scripture passage), John 15 continues to say, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

A DEEPER JOY

Coke Evans wrote another book after *The Vine Life* called *A Deeper Joy*. She reflected on those verses in John 15 that hope you are aware that God's joy is in you so, "your joy may be complete." That is God's hope for our vine connected lives, that we can have the joy of Jesus down in our hearts, and feel complete with God's love abiding in us. When we feel loved and connected, we are empowered to go out and do God's work in the world with no fear or apprehension.

Coke's life wasn't easy. Louis died of ALS and their son Jamie (a pastor) committed suicide two years later. But the roots of Coke's faith ran deep and she survived great sorrow. Now she lives in Fresno, age ninety-two.

So may you live The Vine Life and prune away anything in your life that wastes your time and energy on trivial matters. People living the vine life don't sweat the small stuff. They focus on God's higher purposes for their lives and don't get distracted by self-centered drama and annoyances that don't bear fruit. You can be fruitful in your life when you focus on being as divine as you were born to be. Life is too precious to be wasted. A Vine Life with deeper joy is waiting for you to enjoy!

Benediction:

May you embrace your divine life and go out in joy.

And may the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and forever more. Amen



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