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**Sunday 2 May to Sunday 9 May 2021**

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Sunday 2 May 2021

# Connection

by Ruth Olsen

**I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower … you are the branches (John 15:1,5).**

Read John 15:1–8

This passage might be quite familiar to you. So much can be gleaned from it as the Holy Spirit draws attention to diverse aspects over time. It’s like the process of growing in a relationship and bearing fruit!

What is the relationship here between the true vine and the vinegrower? Isn’t a vine planted by the vinegrower and dependent on the vinegrower for its needs? In most vineyards, pruning would usually happen every year at a designated time. And that pruning can look rather severe. Each year new growth will come on the branches that will, in due time, bear more fruit if the conditions are suitable. Without a connection to the vine, though, a branch is useless, and, in fact, soon dead!

So what’s the connection between the true vine (Jesus), the vinegrower (the Father) and the branches (followers of Jesus)? Relationship. Intimacy. Interdependency, and more. It’s already present between Jesus, the Father and the Spirit. Amazingly, that is what we are grafted into – that relationship between the God-head. Earlier Jesus said, ‘the Father will give you another Counselor, the Spirit [who] lives with you and will be in you. On that day you will realise that I am in my Father, and you are in me, and I am in you’ (John 14:16–20).

Our connection, in and through Jesus, abiding and remaining in him in the richness of relationship, means his life flows in us and then overflows, available to others through ‘fruit that we bear’. All of this is to the Father’s glory! But why pruning? ‘So that it will be even more fruitful’ (verses 2,8 NIV). Jesus desires to give glory to the Father through our bearing much fruit in likeness to him.

Have you been aware of the Father doing pruning in your life? If we are wise, such pruning will prompt us to draw in very close to Jesus and draw deeply from him. In the process, we are renewed and nurtured, and in time, we produce more fruit that tastes of him.

**Holy Spirit, thank you that you are patiently and persistently nurturing, shaping and training me each day, making me more like Jesus. Keep it coming, please. Amen.**

Monday 3 May 2021

# Bitter fruit?

by Ruth Olsen

**I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard (Isaiah 5:1).**

Read Isaiah 5:1–7

This song begins with so much hope and expectation of good things from the choicest vines. But the fruit that grew was not pleasant, indeed, repulsive! The song is interpreted in verse 7 (NRSV):

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry [of distress]!

The NIV Study Bible footnote says a powerful play on words that makes the point: the words for ‘justice’ and ‘bloodshed’ are slightly different but sound alike, as do those for ‘righteousness’ and ‘distress’. The following verses (verses 8–23) then spell out a series of six woes. The Lord looked for justice and righteousness, facets of his character (verse 16) that he imparts and plants in his people. But they chose to feed on things of self rather than of the Lord, and their lives bore that fruit. Let the reader understand, for lack of understanding can lead us astray (verse 13).

We know from elsewhere in Scripture that the Lord first provides for us what he then asks of us.  He gives his Son for us and to us. He desires for us to take him at his word and put it into practice so that we may learn the difference between what he provides and our own futile efforts that end up leading us astray. He pours out his love for humankind and all of creation in and through Jesus, and he says, ‘Love one another’. He gives us his peace and says, ‘Do not let your hearts be troubled…[nor] afraid’ (John 14:27). By taking him at his word, we discover his peace sustaining us.

As we saw in yesterday’s reading, our life, as branches, comes from the vine, Jesus. Let’s soak in his love and learn of him, yielding to him and his Spirit working in us to bring forth fruit that blesses others.

**Teach me your way, O Lord, that I may walk in your truth; give me an undivided heart to revere your name [Psalm 86:11]. Amen.**

Tuesday 4 May 2021

# New wine

by Ruth Olsen

**I will restore the fortunes of my people (Amos 9:14a).**

Read Amos 9:13–15

Have you ever considered that the Lord gets frustrated with his people? And with you and me when we blithely go our own way, not listening to his Spirit’s nudges and promptings and not taking his word to heart and acting on it?

In Amos 4:6–11, we hear a recurring theme: ‘“yet you have not returned to me,” declares the Lord’.  Then again in Amos 5: ‘Seek me and live’ (verse 4), ‘Seek the Lord and live’ (verse 6), ‘Seek good, not evil, that you may live’ (verse 14), ‘Hate evil, love good; maintain justice in the courts’ (verse 15), ‘I hate, I despise your religious feasts; I cannot stand your assemblies’ (verse 21), ‘but let justice roll on like a river’ (verse 24); ‘you have [done your own thing]. Therefore I will send you into exile’ (verses 26,27).

As one continues through the book of Amos, one can hear the Lord’s heart of yearning for his people Israel. Amos interceded for the people, and the Lord relented (7:1–6). Yet injustice and complacency continued, and so the Lord lifted his hand of protection from over Israel, and destruction was allowed in. But not completely, ‘in that day I will restore David’s fallen tent. I will repair its broken places, restore its ruins’ (9:11), followed by the verses of our reading.

What do you hear the Spirit whisper to you through Amos? Do you hear the Lord’s longing to draw you into a closer personal relationship with him? He generously desires for any who trust him to plant and prosper, for the new wine of joy, gladness and fruitfulness to overflow. His blessing is not to be hoarded but passed on to others so that they can receive his patient love, compassion, encouragement and strengthening through us, his people.

**Lord, increase in us your Spirit of wisdom and give us a revelation that we may grow in knowing you and trusting you [Ephesians 1:17]. In your mercy, forgive our unbelief. Soften our hearts and enable us to notice and follow through on your Spirit’s nudges and promptings so that Jesus may give glory to the Father through us also. Amen.**

Wednesday 5 May 2021

# In Jesus’ name

by Ruth Olsen

**If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it (John 14:14).**

Read John 14:1–14

Wow, what a promise Jesus gives us! And what an invitation, opportunity and responsibility! Jesus invites us to work with him! He invites us to pray the kind of prayers that change us and reach beyond ourselves, the ones that touch the Father’s heart for others, reflecting to the Father the heart of Jesus for those being prayed for. He desires to bring glory to the Father – through us!

Jesus is the way to the Father. Jesus is our home base, our safe place and our security. The more we grow in trusting and knowing him, the more we will be enabled to see through his eyes, as it were. He reveals the Father to us as someone who is for us because that’s how Jesus is – for us! He said anyone who has seen him has seen the Father. We look to Jesus, and we are awakened to God as the Father who is for us. And we come to the Father through Jesus’ relationship with the Father. Wow, isn’t that worth taking time to ponder, to chew over? As we grow in knowing Jesus, we will also know the Father as well. And we recognise what the Father is like by how Jesus is. He earnestly desires for us to know the Father.

Tucked into that relationship of love, acceptance and belonging, is an overflowing heart of prayer. In trusting Jesus to meet our needs (including through others), we are increasingly set free to focus away from self and recognise how he wants to bless others, also in answer to our prayers, words and actions. Amazingly, Jesus says anyone who believes in him will also do what he has been doing and even greater things. And in the verses following our reading from John 14–16, he introduces us to the promised Holy Spirit, his Spirit of truth, who is our enabler, helper, teacher and trainer.

**Holy Spirit of Jesus, only you can enable us to do and pray what Jesus desires so that Jesus can give glory to the Father through us also. Open this up further to us. Give us insight, and draw us into a closer relationship and communication with you. Amen.**

Thursday 6 May 2021

# Sweet fruit

by Ruth Olsen

**If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit (Galatians 5:25).**

Read Galatians 5:22–26

Last Sunday, we considered branches in the vine bearing fruit. In these verses today, Paul spells out what this fruit looks like. There’s a diversity of characteristics – the characteristics of Jesus – to match any occasion. We might joke about asking for patience and wanting it now. We might be reluctant about asking the Lord to enable us to grow in patience or self-control, but those times will surely come anyway. If we recognise those testing times as opportunities to rely on the Spirit’s power and help, the outcome might just be a sweeter attitude in dealing with the situation, resulting in sweeter fruit.

The Holy Spirit brings his fruit with him when he is given to us, and each time we practise love, joy, peace and self-control, the fruit grows in us, available to nurture others as we draw life from the Spirit of Jesus at work in us. It’s no ‘fly by night’ deal but a process over time, practice, learning, giving, and replenishing from God each day.

Paul urges his readers, ‘Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature’ (Galatians 5:16–21). Do you recognise that inner battleground? None of us is a passive observer in this process but a participant! We choose which direction we will follow. Some translations use ‘if we live by the Spirit’, and some use a more definite ‘since’, but let us be intentional in following the Spirit’s leading. The pull of sinful nature grows when we give way to it. But by our prayerful act of submitting to God in the authority that Jesus has given us, we are resisting the devil and our old sinful nature (James 4:7). The Spirit is the power of God at work in us! He will patiently teach us how to keep in step with him so that we may honour Jesus.

**Spirit of God, make us more like Jesus in all that we are and do. Amen.**

Friday 7 May 2021

# Be intentional

by Ruth Olsen

**Exercise your freedom by serving God, not by breaking the rules (1 Peter 2:16).**

Read 1 Peter 2:11–20

Yesterday we considered Paul’s admonition to ‘Live by the Spirit, and you will not gratify the desires of the sinful nature’ (Galatians 5:16–21). Our spiritual enemy has had centuries of practise observing and targeting human weaknesses for his purposes of turning people against God. His purpose is to rob, kill and destroy (John 10:10). He doesn’t care how it happens, but he will promote it any way he can, appealing to human cravings, lustful eyes and proud boasting (1 John 3:15–17). He specialises in deception, falsehood and truth distorted to his purposes (see Genesis 3:1–13; John 8:44 etc).

None of us is immune to our enemy’s guile. But the reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s works (1 John 3:8)! Jesus paid a huge price for us! His Spirit now lives within his followers (John 14:15–21), and the One who is in us is greater than the one who is in the world (1 John 4:4).

Peter learned the hard way that his human nature was not sufficient to withstand the enemy. He urges us to abstain from desires that wage war against our soul – our mind, will and emotions (1 Peter 2:11). These are strong words. But strong words are needed for us to take notice and be alert to our giving way to self-focus because sinful nature desires what is contrary to the Spirit (Galatians 5:16–21).

We all have our blind spots. But we can ask the Holy Spirit, our Helper, to enable us to recognise what we are blind to. We can ask him to reveal to us the truth that sets us free to increasingly walk in the freedom of Jesus (John 8:32,36). This requires us to be honest with God and ourselves – to be intentional in living honourably in all that we are and do. In the process, we glorify God. That’s amazing!

**Holy Spirit, continually reveal to us our freedom in Jesus, to serve the Lord and others wherever we are. Help us exercise in our lives the authority Jesus gives us. Amen.**

Saturday 8 May 2021

# A new song

by Ruth Olsen

### Sing to the Lord a new song, for he has done marvellous things (Psalm 98:1a).

**Read Psalm 98**

This psalm is a call to celebrate with joy the righteous reign of the Lord, extending out from the worshipping congregation to all the people of the earth and the whole of creation. The footnote in my NIV Study Bible says it recalls God’s revelation of his righteousness in the past (verse 2), and it speaks confidently of his coming rule ‘in righteousness’ (verse 9), framing the shout for joy that is called forth in the middle verses.

No matter what is going on in the world around us, no matter whether some people ridicule Christianity and the message of Jesus, the followers of Jesus are aware of a bigger picture. We can take God at his word. His word is reliable; when he speaks, something happens (Genesis 1), and when we take him at his word, something also happens! We are no longer empty or easily blown about, for he is our anchor, our light in the growing darkness.

Because Jesus is the light of the world, his followers will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life showing us the way (John 8:12;14:6). The media and social media frequently feed out things that promote darkness and self-centredness. Are we walking in his light, receiving from him, reflecting his light, life, love and care into our situations?

Yes, the Lord has done marvellous things, and he continues to do marvellous things! Many new songs can continually be written, inspired by the Holy Spirit, revealing fresh insights into what the Lord is like, his character, faithfulness, love, mercy and forgiveness, available to all through Jesus.  Maybe if we let ourselves get ‘lost’ in worshipping him in Spirit and truth, joining with creation in singing to him, we will be awakened in trusting and knowing him more.

Have you tried singing your own ‘new song’ to him in spontaneous praise and thanksgiving?

**Lord God, you alone are worthy of all honour, worship and praise! There is none like you, Lord! Amen.**

Sunday 9 May 2021

# Simple, yet difficult

by Pastor Peter Bean

**Love one another (John 15:17).**

Read John 15:9–17

Simple, eh? How many philosophers, songwriters, poets and authors have echoed the Bible’s words: love one another, with the implication that all will be well. Perhaps the cartoonist Leunig captures it best in his cartoon where he states, ‘Love one another and you will be happy; it’s as simple and as difficult as that. There is no other way’.

So, yes, it is simple as that, but it is also very difficult. We all know and have experienced that in our everyday living with our family and friends, not to even mention the loving enemies part. Simple as, yet difficult as.

It would be great if I, and if you, could love one another and all life’s problems disappeared. But it doesn’t work like that, and Jesus knows it better than anyone. Perhaps that’s why before he tells us to love one another, he spells out that the Father loves him, and he remains in the Father’s love.

Just the same Jesus loves us, and we can remain in his love. Then we can love another. It’s not through our own strength or ability; it’s because we, you, I, are first loved unconditionally.

Living in that love allows us to love ourselves and love others. This enables us to look beyond those things that distract from loving. Sharing in the joy that Jesus offers and promises (verse 11) allows us to continue to love when it seems humanly impossible. For me (and that person), replacing negative thoughts about someone with the love of Jesus has changed the way I think, act and speak. It’s this love won for us and given to us by Jesus that allows us to love one another. It’s as simple and as difficult as that!

***Lord Jesus, thank you for loving me as your Father loves you. Help me to live in this love. And through your presence and with your help, help me to love all those I encounter. Amen.***