Well, today’s passage is a well-known one. It is Jesus’ teaching on the vine and the branches. Now in this parable Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and God is the farmer or vine-grower.

(Phone rings.)

Pastor Donna to congregation: Oh, I am so sorry. How embarrassing. I usually leave my phone in the office just so this sort of thing doesn’t happen. But you never know who might be calling, so excuse me while I answer it.

Pastor Donna to caller: Hello, this is Pastor Donna. Oh. Hi Jesus! You do know you are calling during worship, don’t you? (To the congregation: Of course he does!) What’s that you say? You can’t hear me? Well, let me try standing somewhere else.

Can you hear me now? (Move again.) Can you hear me now? (Move one more time.) How about this? Can you hear me now?

Well, that great! I’m glad you can hear me. Now what can I do for you today, Lord?

I’m sorry. What did you say? Oh dear! Now I can’t hear you. You’re breaking up. We must have a bad connection. Could you please call me back a little later? Maybe we will have a good connection then. OK. Thanks. Goodbye!

Pastor Donna to Congregation: I guess you never know when Jesus is going to call! Wow! We sure had a bad connection!

You know, I wonder if Jesus had come to earth in the 21st century instead of the 1st century if he might not have tried teaching us about our spiritual connection to him by using a technological metaphor like
cell phones rather than the agrarian example of a grape vine. I think if Jesus were here today he would explain that to have a good connection with him we need to make sure we keep our cell phones in good working order, that we need to be near enough to a cell tower to have service and that we shouldn’t put ourselves in places where reception is hampered or blocked lest the call be dropped.

Because if Jesus had used that kind of metaphor, we might understand that he was telling us we need to do the things that will ensure our spiritual connection to him is in good working order – like spending time in prayer, being in the Word (reading scripture), and coming to worship regularly with other Christians. We might have understood that these things keep us near to Christ, so that our hearts can hear him more clearly. And we might understand that when we choose not to do the things that improve our connection or we choose to do things that distance us from him, we can’t hear him at all and we just might get completely disconnected.

But Jesus came to the Jews, the people of Israel, in the 1st century, so he utilized imagery they would have understood, a vineyard. Because, you see, vineyards would have been very familiar to Jesus’ disciples. As they walked from town to town, they would have passed many vineyards along the way. The fruit of the vines, grapes and the wine made from them, were considered staples in the ancient Middle East. Not only did people grow them for their own use, they were a cash crop. And because of their value, the care of grape vines was more or less common knowledge. Most people knew that even if a branch was healthy and producing fruit, it still needed to be trimmed in just the right way so it could produce more fruit. They also knew that unhealthy branches needed to cut off in order for the vine to thrive.

So Jesus says to his disciples, “‘He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.’” Now many sermons have been preached on the ways in which God prunes people. I don’t know about you, but this idea has never been very attractive to me. Pruning seems like a painful process even if sometimes it is necessary. But as I was researching this passage I noticed there is another way to interpret it. Bible scholars tell us that the Greek phrase for “He prunes,” also means “He cleans.”
Like I said, I think this makes so much sense when we continue reading on into the next verse. Listen to this new interpretation: Jesus says, “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he cleans so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” Now this makes more sense, but let me give you a real-life, modern-day explanation.


The man said, “I own a large vineyard in northern California, and I think I have it figured out.” So Wilkinson offered to buy the man a cup of coffee on the spot.

As they sat across the restaurant table from each other, the man began to talk about his life as a grower - the long hours spent walking the vineyards, tending the grapes, watching the fruit develop, waiting for the perfect day to begin the harvest. I then he gave Wilkinson a lesson in vine growing. He said, “New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground, but they don’t bear fruit down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildew. The branch becomes sick and useless.”

“What do you do?” Wilkinson asked. “Cut it off and throw it away?”

“Oh, no!” the man exclaimed. “The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches [growing along the ground]. We lift them up and wash them off . . . Then we wrap them around the trellis or tie them up. Pretty soon they’re thriving.”

This is what Jesus is talking about. He is the vine; we are the branches. But sometimes we are like those low-lying branches trailing along the ground. Our leaves are coated with dirt. When it rains we get coated with mud and mildew. We become incapable of bearing
fruit. What does the owner of the vineyard do with us? Does he cut us off and throw us in the fire? No, we are too valuable to him for that. Instead, he tenderly washes us off and lifts us up with his gentle hands and places us up higher where we can thrive again.

Isn’t this a magnificent picture of what Christ does in our lives? “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower . . . Every branch that does bear fruit he cleans so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”

Now how do we insure we remain clean, lifted up and bearing fruit? By abiding (or remaining) in Christ. “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.”

My friends, this means we can only be what Christ has called us to be and bear fruit by remaining in constant fellowship with him. This requires consistent time in prayer, reading and studying the bible, being present in worship. And when we do these things we will bear the fruit of love – we will give generously, we will serve faithfully, and we will be witnesses to the life-giving power of the True Vine.

I read a story that illustrates the necessity of remaining connected to the source. An Anglican missionary in Africa depended on a small generator to supply current for his small church and rectory because there was no utility service in the rural area where he served.

One evening some tribesmen came to visit this missionary. They noticed an electric light hanging from the ceiling of his living room. They watched wide-eyed as he flipped the little switch and the light went on. One of the visitors asked if he could have a bulb like the one in the light fixture.

The missionary, thinking he wanted it for a sort of trinket, gave the man one of his extra bulbs. Sometime later the missionary stopped at the hut of the man who had asked for the bulb. Imagine his surprise when he saw the bulb hanging in the center of the man’s hut from an ordinary string. Of course there was no light coming from the bulb because it wasn’t connected to a power source. The missionary patiently explained to the man who owned the hut that one needed to
have electricity and a wire to bring the current to the bulb for it to glow.

No electricity, no light. No cell tower, no service. No vine, no fruit. No Christ, no Holy Spirit, no life-giving power for the believer. We cannot bear fruit apart from him.

So now you understand the significance of using the vine as metaphor in this parable. And I hope you get the point that we need to stay connected to Christ whether we are talking about vines and branches, electricity and light bulbs, or cell phones and cell phone towers. Because regardless of the metaphor or analogy used, the question is: How good is your connection to the One from whom we receive life-giving power? Amen.