

Rev. Yugo Suzuki's sermon

5/10/09 **"I Am the Vine; You Are the Branches"** John 15: 1-11

Imagine yourself lying on your deathbed, thinking you have only a few hours to live. What would you be thinking in that situation? You will not be thinking, "How much money have I made?" You will not be thinking, "How far have I climbed the ladder of social status?"

Rather, you will be thinking, "How much have I contributed to the wellbeing of others?" You will be thinking, "How much joy have I instilled in others?" You will be thinking, "Was my life a source of comfort for others?"

In short, on your deathbed, your most urgent, most important question will be, "How much have I loved?"

In this context, let us reflect on the meaning of Jesus' words to his disciples. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

These words of Jesus teach us one important truth: there is a question more fundamental than "How much have I loved?" That question is, "How much have I been loved." "How much have I been loved?" precedes "How much have I loved?" Why? Because we learn to love by being loved. Those who have not been loved do not know how to love.

We learned to love, because we were loved by parents, siblings, relatives, and friends. Without experiencing love, we would be incapable of love.

But there is one problem: human love is partial. It is conditional. Take parental love for example.

Parents will die for their children. They will sacrifice anything for them. But parental love, however pure and however strong, is partial. It is conditioned by the fact that the children are their own. It would be difficult to find a parent who will sacrifice his or her life for a stranger's child.

Then, too, parental love can degenerate into hatred under certain circumstances.

Some time ago, I watched the following shocking scene on television. The Red Cross brought to a refugee camp in Africa a truckload of food. A mother picked up a piece of bread and gave it to her infant child. Another mother took it away and gave it to her child. The two mothers started to beat each other over a piece of bread for their children.

All human love is like that. It is partial and conditional. It has the tendency to degenerate into hatred and divisiveness.

The branch by itself cannot bear fruit. The branch must constantly receive nourishment from the vine. Likewise, our conditional and impartial love cannot by itself make our human life truly human. It must be grafted to impartial and unconditional love.

Jesus is God's pure and unbounded love. On the cross he prayed for those who ridiculed and spat at him, "Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing." Jesus' love corrects and redeems human love. The world's principalities, powers, and even death cannot deny the liberating power of this pure and unbounded love.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. Let us be bound to him. Abiding in him, we will be able to tear down the dividing walls of hostility that separate a human being from another human being. We will be empowered to bear fruit. Jesus is the vine; we are the branches, indeed.

Thanks be to God.