

Want to Bear Good Fruit?

Abide in Christ

“I am the vine, and you are the branches.” John 15:5

John 15:1-11
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Last Sunday we explored the implications of the theological statement in the gospel of John, put on the lips of Jesus, “I am the Good Shepherd”. We talked about how sheep know the voice of their Shepherd, and how we must work to distinguish it from all the other voices in society, and for some of us, those within our own heads. But as is the role of the Good Shepherd, we could look back over this past life-altering year of pandemic and identify where Christ responded to our deepest yearnings for community, offering an alternative to our fears, isolation, insecurities, and even battles with mental health issues like depression and anxiety.

As an aside, the month of **May**, which we have just entered, is recognized as **Mental Health Awareness month**, so I will be addressing some of these issues, as I have over the past few weeks.

One of the primary roles of the Good Shepherd is to keep the flock gathered together. And we will see evidence of that next Sunday, May 9, which, as you know, will be our first in-person gathering here in the sanctuary in 14 months. I give thanks to God for the work that the Good Shepherd, Christ, has done in and among us this past year to keep us gathered together.

I've intentionally reviewed some of this shepherding information from last week's sermon because there is a natural connection with this week's gospel reading. It's another one of John's theological statements concerning the nature and character of Jesus, of Christ's purpose and Presence in our midst. **“I am the true vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit”** (15:5a). In what is known in John as Jesus' “Farewell Discourse”, Jesus is engaged in urgent pastoral care, assuring his companions (and through the gospel writer, the later church) that his imminent departure is not abandonment, but rather will make way for an even deeper intimacy.

Picture in your mind a vineyard. While a very common and relatable image for Jesus' hearers, it's something most of us don't know enough about. So, here's a quick botany lesson. Grapes are a very labor-intensive crop. Each year, the branches must be extensively pruned (cut back) because otherwise they would grow wild and vigorously out of control. Non-productive branches are cut off and removed. A new plant is not even allowed to produce fruit for the first three years so that all its nutrients can be stored in the vine.

Ultimately, **this rich allegorical language rightly reminds us that we are connected to something greater than ourselves.** As Christians, we identify that as God, or the Divine, or the Sacred. It's what 20th century theologian Paul Tillich called, ‘the

ground of all being.' **And the result of this intimate arrangement is the production of good fruit, which among other things can be put most simply as attitudes and acts of love, kindness, peace, justice, forgiveness, hospitality, inclusion, forgiveness, and compassion.**

This vine and branches metaphor, unfortunately however, has too often been tied to the message, "If you want to live, you'd better stay connected to me, or else." Rather, it is actually a pastoral message, "Don't worry, we'll be together; your life itself and all its fruit will testify to the ongoing intimacy with me." The overall theme is one of **mutual indwelling**. Let me explain. Through the particular lens of Celtic spirituality and indigenous spirituality, among others, we affirm the Sacred Presence of God dwelling, abiding, within each one of us. It's not something that came from outside ourselves, it is and always has been within the very makeup of who God created us to be. The major point the gospel writer is trying to make with this vine and branches metaphor is that each one of us also dwell within Christ, within the Sacred Presence of God.

Think about that. **This is a deeply organic connection and interrelationship. We are to live in Christ as Christ lives in us. The natural consequence of this intimate indwelling and abiding relationship is the bearing of much fruit, good fruit.** In an unrelated passage of scripture from Galatians 5:22-23, the apostle Paul identifies the fruit of the Spirit as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Reflect upon which of those you particularly exhibit as a fruitful gift in your life. Paul states that whenever you and I exhibit these things in our life, we are reflecting the Spirit of God working in and through our lives.

Our relationship with God, therefore, has a purpose. Perhaps another way to state this is that **any good fruit we bear in life is an extension of our being connected to God**. The author uses a term he repeats often in his gospel: **abide**. He writes, "Abide 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit" (15:4-5). In the Greek language, the word which is translated as "abide" carries a much deeper and profound meaning than we attach to it today. It more literally means to make an encampment, or to dwell or sojourn with another.

We dwell within the Presence of Christ in our lives. John assures us, then, that such a relationship leads to the bearing of much fruit. However, like the nature of a grapevine itself, **fruit-bearing only comes after some careful pruning, and sometimes even cutting off dead or unproductive branches**. For you gardeners, I'm sure you have already done some pruning to many of your plants and bushes this spring. But how can we apply this part of the metaphor to our personal lives and the life of this community of faith? I think it begins with an honest assessment of just what is productive and useful in our lives, and in the life of this congregation, and what is not. But notice that I intentionally state "what" not "who" is productive and useful. From a progressive Christianity standpoint, I do not think that this biblical text should ever be used in a judgmental and condemning way to try and determine if someone isn't bearing any good fruit and should therefore be cast out of our fellowship. Unfortunately, this is how some churches throughout the ages have interpreted and implemented this passage.

Instead, this act of pruning should be seen as allowing God to help us identify and cut away those things in our own personal lives, and our congregational life, that steal away and divert our strength and energy and focus – anything that would keep us from producing the good fruit of works of love and compassion. So, here's a tough

question to reflect upon this week: **At this given point in your life, what might need pruning back or cutting out?**

As together we discern and renegotiate what our communal and congregational life back together after the pandemic will look and be like, what might need pruning back or cutting out? What can each of us cast aside or leave behind in order to make us healthier, fruit-bearing individuals, and as a community of faith? Jill Duffield writes:

Living out the answers to the question 'What does love require of us?' will inevitably bear good fruit, yet will always involve pruning – sometimes radical and painful pruning.

That's the rub of this text from John. The branches that bear good fruit must endure change and loss. Abiding in Jesus never allows us to get too comfortable. Jesus gives the gift of peace, not worldly security and safety.

Loving as Jesus calls us to love can put us, then, on difficult and uncomfortable roads. It has throughout the history of College Hill. And there is another tough reality. Again, Duffield asks, **"If we are unwilling to abide with one another [and I would add, all others] how can we possibly abide in Jesus, the true vine to which all our branches are connected?" This speaks directly and intensely to our own patterns of segregation, whether based on race, politics, or religious differences.**

On the upcoming 100th anniversary of the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre, it doesn't take much courage to call out those fellow Tulsans from a century ago on their racism. Holding ourselves accountable here and now, however, does take courage. Duffield again, "Knowing that abiding in Jesus Christ demands pruning for transformative growth to occur, if our [thoughts and] actions keep us comfortable and safe we can be sure our branches will, sooner or later, be barren and dead, useful only as fuel for the fire. Only in taking the risks that love demands will bear good fruit."

Therefore, let us constantly ask of ourselves, as individuals and as College Hill, "What does love require?" I encourage you to reflect upon, meditate on, and pray about this concept of mutual indwelling, of abiding in Christ as Christ abides in us. And as branches, individually connected to the same vine, think about what that has to say about our own mutuality and interrelatedness – with our families, with others in this community of faith, others in this city, and with all others. And in closing, let me remind you what the Gospel writer, in verse 11, goes on to say what Jesus believes is the purpose and end result of all this: **"I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."**

May we be known as a joyous, loving, fruit bearing, grapevine-like community of faith.

Amen.

Resource:

Jill Duffield, "Where are the fruitful places for sharing the gospel?", *The Presbyterian Outlook*, 4-23-18.