

FRUITFULNESS

John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 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. “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

MESSAGE:

Jesus is the sole source of spiritual life for his disciples. He is the vine and we are the branches; if we remain connected to Jesus we draw life from him; if we separate ourselves from Him, we wither and die. In eight verses he repeats this thought eight times, and the fact that he emphasizes it so strongly is an indication that he considers there to be a danger that his disciples might be tempted to try to draw life from other sources. The fact is, just as we originally receive spiritual life from Jesus in our baptism, we retain this life ONLY by remaining connected to Him. As long as we are connected with Jesus, we bear fruit; apart from we die and are fit only to be gathered up and thrown into the fire.

Now when Jesus compared himself to a vine he was well aware—as were his disciples—that throughout the *Old Testament*, God had compared Israel to a vine. “*Israel [is] a spreading vine,*” the Lord said through the prophet Hosea. The vine became such a familiar symbol of Israel that later in the Old Testament era the image of a vine was stamped on their coins—like the images of an eagle or liberty torch that appear on some of our coins.

But when Israel was described as a vine in the *Old Testament* it was frequently in a negative sense! *Jeremiah 2:21* is a good example: “The Lord said to Israel: ‘*I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?*’” God had planted Israel like a vine in a vineyard. He had showered her with his grace and nourished her with the manna of his word and sacraments so that she might show forth the fruits of his love to all mankind: the fruits of righteousness, justice and mercy and peace. God had appointed Israel to be His *church*, his means of reaching out to all the people of the earth with his gifts. Israel was to be a light to the nations, a blessing to all mankind, as God had promised Abram: “*All families on earth will be blessed through you.*” But it hadn’t turned out that way.

Instead, the Israelites became self-absorbed and ingrown. They came to believe that God had chosen them to HOARD his blessings rather than SHARE them with the other peoples of the earth. The chosen people convinced themselves that they had been chosen for *privilege* rather than for *service*. The result was that instead of bearing fruit for the world, Israel went to seed in her own garden.

But unlike *Old Testament* Israel, which had become a wild and corrupt vine, Jesus was the true vine who had come to bear the fruits that Israel had failed to bear. Like any other fruit-producing vine, the “Jesus” vine would produce fruits of righteousness and justice and mercy and peace through its branches, the disciples. Through his disciples, Jesus would produce fruit for the world. And his disciples, of course, are you and me.

The problem is that even though it is the purpose of branches to produce fruit, in a fallen world they produce useless foliage as well. Unless they are pruned, the branches of a fruit tree will produce unproductive growth. So God, the divine Gardener, enters with his pruning shears and prunes or “cleans off” unproductive growth from the branches so that they will be more fruitful. And this is key to what the parable has to teach us about our faith-lives.

The fruit of Christian living does not come from undirected enthusiasm: allowing all our energies and natural inclinations to run riot. Not *everything* that occurs to us to do as Christians is necessarily what God wants us to be doing. God will shape us, form us for fruitful living by “pruning” our misbegotten impulses and actions, so that we won’t become wild and corrupt vines, like ancient Israel did. He didn’t adopt us in order to let us run amok any more than a parent would adopt a child and let them run amok, or a gardener would plant a garden and let it go to the weeds. He prunes our growth so that we will be more productive. In a fallen world, not all growth is good growth: cancer cells grow as rapidly as good cells do.

There is a lesson here for parents, by the way. Just as the job of the fruit farmer is not to simply feed the trees in his orchard and let them grow as they will, but to prune them so that they produce good fruit; the job of parents is not to raise happy, active children, but to form children into responsible, productive adults. Jews have a word for this kind of person: they call him a mensch. A “mensch” is a mature, responsible adult. The job of a parent is to raise a mensch, not a perpetually happy adolescent. Happiness is the icing on the cake—not the cake itself. If the cake is nothing but icing, it collapses, and if you eat it, it will make you sick. God’s goal for His children is not to make them happy, but to help them grow up.

Not every idea that occurs to us as members of the Body of Christ is a good idea. We are capable of making mistakes! We must remain open to God’s pruning of our wrongheaded impulses. He will find ways of letting us know as long as we remain firmly attached to the vine.

Notice that God has promised to prune only the branches of the true vine—the church that is grafted into Jesus Christ. He will not tend to “other vineyards”—the false faiths,

the cults, the heretical religious sects. Those vineyards may seem to grow faster and more luxuriously than the pruned and tended vineyard does.

But ultimately they become wastelands of riotous growth, neither pruned nor cultivated and bearing no Godly fruit. Overgrown with briars and thorns they become food for the brush hog.

After Jesus ascended into heaven, Satan fiercely attacked the newborn church, sowing lies in her and distorting God's word. The lies multiplied like tumors and spread throughout her body. But thanks be to God, he sent faithful pastors and theologians who pointed out the lies and cut out the tumors and restored the purity of God's teaching in the church. If I were to name these heresies right now, you wouldn't recognize a single one.

Lies come and go and are forgotten, but the truth remains. And so it will be with the cults and heretical sects of our day. Like untended vineyards, they will go to seed, having never born fruit. But we are called to bear good fruit, for *it is by its fruit that the vine is known to the world*. A grape vine may not be recognizable to the average person by its leaves, but it will be recognized as soon as the grapes begin to appear. *By their fruits you will know them.*" And so it is by bearing fruit that believers show forth Christ to the world.

If we bear bad fruit, Christ is disgraced. If we bear good fruit, Christ is honored. He has left it up to us. But what is the fruit which God calls believers to bear for the kingdom? One kind of fruit is something we do for Him, and the other kind is something He does through us. To understand what he wants us to do for Him, you first have to consider why a vine or fruit tree produces fruit in the first place.

Several years ago I enrolled in a course in gardening. The first thing the instructor did in the first class was to ask us a question. The question was: what is the goal of a fruit tree? We unanimously answered, "To bear fruit." "Nope," he said. "The goal of a fruit tree is to reproduce itself. It does it by bearing fruit that has seeds in it that will make new fruit trees."

In the same way, the goal of a disciple is to reproduce himself, as Christ commanded us: "...go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you." And like the vine or the fruit tree, the way he does this is by bearing fruit in the form of a life that overflows with evidence of God's love and mercy. With a tongue that is quick to thank God publicly for all His blessings. With arms that are always ready to help someone who needs a helping hand. With eyes that seek to discern the good in people rather than the bad. With ears that are always listening to God's word. A person like that will reproduce himself many times over.

Every disciple has the ability to devote himself to producing this kind of fruit. And as he does, the Holy Spirit will be at work in him producing inner fruit. I am speaking of the fruit of the Spirit which Paul describes for us in his *Letter to the Galatians*. "*The fruit of the*

Spirit,” Paul writes, “*is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*” As the vine produces the branch and the branch naturally produces the fruit, God will produce the fruit of His Spirit in the believer.

Now you will notice that all these different kinds of fruit are not deeds of men, they are gifts from God. And these gifts by their very nature cannot keep from expressing themselves in deeds. Love is not something we just luxuriate in; it expresses itself in deeds of love. In fact, love doesn’t really BECOME love until it finds someone TO love. And joy—joy isn’t something that lies dormant. In fact “dormant joy” is an oxymoron—like dry water or cold heat” joy BECOMES joy when it expresses itself in rejoicing.

God gives us these gifts, the fruit of the Spirit, so that we will glorify Him by expressing them. He gives us peace not only so that we can experience peace in our hearts, but so that we can impart peace to others. He gives us patience not only to take away our anxiety, but so that we can produce peace in other people. He gives us kindness so that we can be kind to others, faithfulness so that we can be faithful to others—and so on.

Each gift comes from God and passes through us into the world, glorifying the One who gave it. When we think about the fruit we bear in this way, it removes all danger of pride. Our good deeds are just how we express the fruit of the Holy Spirit of God. We didn’t devise them ourselves; we were merely the vehicles—the branches—through whom God sends them out into the world. This may have been what Luther had in mind when he said that “*Christians should walk among their good deeds as in a paradise of God.*” God created us, redeemed us, and sanctifies us every day through the working of His Spirit in our hearts and minds and mouths and hands.

Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. But as long as we remain connected to him, we bear beautiful fruit.

Amen