

Preacher: Pastor Twyla

Scripture: John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

My Grandma King, who was Amish, lived on a big farm. In her front yard she had an arbor with healthy concord grape vines growing on it. One of my favorite times of year to visit Grandma was when the grapevines were full of grapes. Grandma would let us pick and eat as many as we wanted. Sometimes I ate too many and got a tummy ache. But the grapes were big and juicy, making it hard to stop eating them.

As a kid, I did not understand all the work that went into producing the wonderful fruit that I enjoyed. When I think back on it now, I remember that the grapevines were very well kept. They were not gnarly. There weren't any dead branches on the vine. The fruit was easy to find and pick. I know now that it took some skillful work to produce that luscious fruit.

We heard in the scripture read for us this morning, Jesus' illustration using the vine, the vine grower, the branches, and the process needed to make good fruit to teach an important lesson to his disciples and us. The use of the vineyard as an illustration is not unique to this story. The prophet Isaiah used it in chapter five of the prophet's book to relay God's disappointment with the Jews who did not produce good fruit in spite of all that God had done for the people.

John 15 is a part of Jesus' final conversation with his disciples. It actually begins in John 13 with Jesus washing their feet and announcing the "new commandment," to love one another as he loved them (13:34). This commandment is then repeated in 15:12 and Jesus goes on then to explain to his disciples in verse 16 of chapter 15, that in loving one another, his disciples bear good fruit, which is exactly what he wants them to do.

The grapevine is a prolific plant. A healthy single vine potentially bears many grapes. Jesus said that he is the vine, and God is the gardener. The branches are all those who claim to be followers of Christ. Fruitful branches are true believers who by their living in union with Christ and one another produce much more fruit.

Jesus' words about the believers' union with him indicate that fruitfulness is not so much something we do as something we are. Vines and fruit trees do not have to strive to be fruitful. If they are healthy and connected to a source of water and nutrients, they will bear fruit – that's just what happens naturally.

Likewise, if we have union with Jesus, we will bear fruit. Our values, priorities, desires, and dreams will all line up with those which God expects from us. We will naturally become lovers of God and, likewise, of people, all of whom are the children of God. We will naturally become concerned for the well-being of others and for our planet. When we have union with Jesus, we will find compassion and love flowing freely because that is the heart of Christ, alive in us.

This is true for us as individuals, which is how I think most of us understand this text. But the text covers a much larger scope as it means to speak to us collectively as God's church. Think about it—a grape vine has more than one branch; it has many branches that can bear lots and lots of good fruit. You and I are the branches, and together as this church body, connected to the true Vine, Jesus, we are called to bear good fruit. The life of the Vine flows thru each one of us, giving us, the whole HCOB family, the talents and the tools, the love and compassion we need to nurture one another, and to take the Good News beyond the walls of this building.

As a part of God's grand vineyard, we have been blessed during a very difficult season. While many churches have suffered injury during the pandemic, we had persevered and grown. With the growth we have experienced has come new possibilities to help us to bear luscious good fruit. Even though the pandemic has forced us to limit what we can do, we have found ways to be fruitful.

Volunteering to help for a week at the cold weather shelter, Reach, handing out lunches during a prayer walk, collecting food for the food pantry and collecting food boxes for families in need during our Advent calendar project, preparing care packages for our college students, sharing our worship services on Facebook Live, sharing care to those who are a part of our church family and those who are not through phone calls and sending cards, holding drive-by events to help older adults celebrate their birthdays—all of these and more have been avenues through which we were able to bear fruit in spite of the pandemic. God's work cannot be stopped when we are connected to Christ and each other.

I believe this is just a small taste of what is possible for us to do together. It's a precursor to what is possible in the time to come. As we move ahead, we will need to listen and watch how and where God is pruning our vineyard, so that we can grow in our union with the vine, making us more equipped to do God's will.

God's pruning may require that we let go of some old ideas, long-time traditions, rules or irrelevant notions that do not speak to current needs and ministries that have run their course, or at the very least we may need to evaluate them, and if deemed still of value to bear fruit, give them new life.

Without God's pruning, these things can become extra weighty branches and huge leaves that hide the fruit or cause disease in the fruit we bear. When people cannot see the fruit a church bears, they cannot pick nor partake of it, which is something we definitely don't want to allow to happen. Graciously then, we should welcome God's pruning.

How will we know what God wants to prune? Through prayer, worship, Bible study, listening to one another, listening to our inner selves without turning that still small voice off as soon as it makes us a bit uncomfortable, listening to the voices of the culture around us, recognizing, without hesitation and fear, our gifts and abilities and planning how to use them, through all of this we discover how our vine grower wants to prune us, so we will produce more amazingly good fruit for all to enjoy.

Something else that we should be cognizant of as we move forward is a warning against something that has become a priority for many churches and it has stunted the vision of some churches, and that something involves the size vs. the quality of the fruit in our vineyard. For a number of years now, churches have bought-into the mantra of growing the numbers, the membership of the church rather than nurturing the fruit to be quality fruit.

Jesus doesn't call the vine to growth; he calls it to fruitful. Indeed, we want our churches to be filled with believers, however, our focusing on "getting people into the pews" rather than focusing on sharing natural good fruit with those who never tasted the sweet fruit of Christ,

skews a congregation's motivation for the vision for planning and carrying-out God's call on them.

Congregations should ask themselves why do we want people to come to church? Is it to grow the attendance records; or is it so they can meet and grow in Jesus? You see, if we're connected to the vine, the motivation for what we do comes from our hearts...revealing love and compassion. The fruit we share makes a person feel valued...alive...and cared for...not like merely another number to be counted in the pew. Think about it, no one likes feeling like a number. You likely know how that feels...and it's not good. So...of course we want to continue to grow...but as we plan for fulfilling God's call to make that happen, we can't lose sight of why we want to grow.

Finally, the aim of managing the vineyard is to strike a balance between growing leaves and growing fruit. There are many leaves in the vineyard, but as I said earlier, we don't want the leaves to hide the fruit so others can't find it and pick it. I see many of the leaves representing our everyday lives. We are not people without a life of our own; and it's within a well-disciplined life that fruit grows. Each one of us has the opportunity to bear fruit even when we are not doing it together through programs and outreach. We go our different directions when we leave our time together to do many different things...but we all are still connected to each other, and more importantly, we are all connected to the vine. Hopefully, in all that we do and say when we are not together, we continue to bear fruit.

Just because we leave the church and go on with our individual lives does not mean we let the leaves, the stuff of our everyday living cover the fruit of the vine, hiding, not necessarily intentionally, from those who need it. Although we may not be together, we are all still connected to the vine, being fed with the same nourishment and energy, still working together for the same purpose of building God's kingdom, only now, in our own little corner of the world.

I find myself thinking about our future ministry together, especially now as the pandemic seems to be loosening its' grip on us, I hope. What will our work for God look like? I'm sure it has changed from the many years that have gone by. As we have grown, I wonder about how we will use the new gifts and talents God has given us. I get excited when I think about new life, new dreams and all the possibilities available to us. I feel excitement as I sense the Spirit moving among us reviving our tired darkened moods due to the pandemic.

We heard our District Executive tell us last Sunday that due to the pandemic, many people have wandered away from the church and their faith. So, I wonder, what are we going to do about that? Surely, God is not saying it is okay for us to ignore this fact! We need to do something, and we will do something if obedience to God is our priority. Surely, we will do something if we are truly connected to the Vine! The evidence that we are connected to the vine is revealed as we witness ourselves and the lost enjoying and growing in faith because of the excellent fruit we produce.