

God's Vineyard

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

Genealogy has become a hobby of many. There is a longing to know about our ancestors, to have grounding in our family roots, to know from whence we come.

Jesus was a genealogist of sorts. Instead of a family tree, he spoke of the spiritual family vine to which we belong. God is the Vinegrower, the Gardener. Jesus is the Vine, the main branch from which all others spring. Jesus is the source of spiritual life for the rest of the plant. Off that main vine are the branches of Jesus' friends and followers. Our purpose is to bear fruit, fruit of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

The metaphor of the vineyard is integral to the Christian community and has much to teach us about the Christian life and faith. Living among the vineyards of Sonoma County, you are undoubtedly familiar with many aspects of growing grapes. In John's Gospel, Jesus lifts up two particular aspects which draw our attention today: pruning and abiding.

Pruning is a prominent element in today's passage. Branches that no longer bear fruit are removed. Fruit-bearing branches are pruned in order that they might produce more abundantly. We've seen the vineyards pruned back so that the vines appear lifeless, and yet in due season they spring to life with bright green tendrils.

This winter I cut back the plants in my yard. An employee with a landscape company came by and remarked that I had cut them back too far. I feared that I had made a terrible mistake and killed the bushes. However, the plants have indeed blossomed with life once again. They are fuller, more vibrant than in previous years. Instead of diminishing the plants, the pruning enabled the plants to flourish.

Pruning may feel like a judgment, a critique that what has been was wrong. There are indeed branches that have not grown healthy fruit and which need to be cut off and thrown into the fire. We see that in the racial injustice that has smothered the lives of black Americans for centuries. The branch of economic inequality needs to be pruned back so that the poor are not sacrificed for the glorification of wealth. The idolatry of individualism and personal preferences hinders the flourishing of other branches in God's vineyard.

There are also times when perfectly good vines need to be cut in order to concentrate the vine's energy. The vine has only enough energy to nourish a few canes well. Pruning a vine involves making strategic choices. Harvard's Michael Porter wrote, "The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do." Vine growers know that there are seasons for cutting back old growth to allow new growth to emerge. Gardeners diligently weed their plots, purging them of weeds that rob the soil of nutrients and moisture necessary for the flourishing of desired plants.

The word translated "pruned" literally means "to cleanse," "to purge," "to purify." The verb is typically used for ceremonial cleansing, not for pruning vines. The word is chosen here because Jesus is talking about people rather than branches.

There are times to set aside a spiritual discipline that has become rote, producing lackluster fruit, and take up a new practice in order to stretch and grow in fresh dimensions. Pruning comes as we snip off old ways of thinking and being that exclude and isolate. We make space for planting new attitudes that expand our horizons and enrich our lives. Circumstances can lead us to prune back an activity and devote our resources to new ventures. We are often surprised to find life greatly enhanced by change.

Just as individuals need pruning of activities, attitudes, and habits, so also do organizations, including the church. It is easy to drift away from a primary mission or purpose. Sometimes we have a touch of amnesia and forget our calling to be connected to the vine of Christ and bear fruit in the form of works of love. We get stuck in a rut, doing what we've always done because it is familiar and comfortable, but we don't always realize that it no longer serves the core purpose of bearing fruit that nourishes life abundant. An annual review of a mission statement guides us in evaluating what is true to our character and what excess baggage is not essential to our core purpose. Ministries and activities may have served a purpose at a particular season, but as time moves on, new occasions call for focused activity.

At every Church Council meeting, the leaders of this congregation recite the mission statement: We the people of First United Methodist Church of Santa Rosa commit ourselves to the mission of growing loving communities of faith centered on Jesus that express themselves through both personal spirituality and social responsibility, reaching up to God and reaching out to all people in God's love.

Using the images of today's scripture, a paraphrase of the mission of this congregation would be to cultivate thriving vineyards anchored in the True Vine

of Jesus Christ, bearing the fruit of the Holy Spirit in individual lives and in service and witness to the community at large. A key phrase is “centered on Jesus.” This is what makes a church distinctive from social organizations that serve the community. Our roots are deeply anchored in the soil of faith. We serve not simply to do good or feel good. We serve because we follow a man named Jesus who revealed a godly way of life and perspective on humanity and creation.

In a vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. That is where the nutrients are most concentrated. That’s why the lateral branches are not allowed to ramble all over the arbor. They are pruned and kept short. Christians seek to stay close to the true vine of Jesus. A favorite scripture of mine is John the Baptist saying of Jesus, “He must increase; I must decrease.”

Abiding in Christ allows the character of Christ to influence us and to grow within us. We humans tend to take on some of characteristics of those with whom we spend the most time. As we make our home in Christ and allow Christ to make a home in us, we emulate the qualities of Jesus. Our preferences, opinions, and thoughts are shaped by our attachment to the True Vine of Christ. The presence of Christ within us increases, prompting us to bear good fruit in the form of works of love.

Pruning and abiding in Christ go together. As we make our home in Christ, as our connection to the True Vine is strengthened, we prune away those attitudes and behaviors which are not Christ-like. We bear a family resemblance to our spiritual ancestor Jesus. We bear fruit of the Holy Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, & self-control.

May we abide in Christ, savoring the rich flavor of life of faith, and not be fearful to prune that which must decrease in order for Christ to increase.

Master Gardener, we rejoice in the splendor of springtime with its reminders that you are forever working in the world, creating new life out of old. You guide us to prune that which is no longer useful or beneficial and direct our energies toward that which is life-giving. Help us be honest in our self-examination, that we might prune that which is unhealthy or even harmful to ourselves and others.

We long to abide more deeply in the presence of Christ, that His qualities might increase in us. Our spirits are open to receive a fresh wind of your Spirit, that we might bear holy fruit. May our lives yield a rich harvest of blessing for those whom we know and love and for those beyond our circles of concern.

We give thanks for the community of faith which is as a trellis, supporting us in our growth. We give thanks for those who pray for us, those who inquire about our well-being, and those who serve us. As we anticipate a joyous reunion, strengthen the bonds of faith and love which unite us in Christ Jesus.

We pray for those who long for community, who feel lonely and even afraid. Offer them your companionship. Abide with all who grieve the losses of this past year, granting them hope for new beginnings. Strengthen those who are ill, restoring health of body, mind, and spirit.

Journey with migrants seeking safe refuge in a foreign land and grow within us the hospitality of Christ. Be present with members of the LGBTQ community who feel rejected, and growth within us the inclusive love of Jesus. Encourage those who are unsheltered, guiding them toward stability.

May your Spirit move in powerful ways in our congregation offering guidance and opening hearts for the new pastors and families preparing to serve among us. Keep us centered on Jesus, connected to the True Vine, that we might bear fruit worthy of his name. Amen.

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