

Sermons at Union Congregational Church

Preached by The Reverend Gail L. Miller, Pastor

April 29, 2018

Fifth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-8

Remaining on the Vine

Last week (Good Shepherd Sunday) Jesus was the Good Shepherd, we were the sheep. This week the image shifts and now Jesus says that he is the vine, we are the branches and there is pruning and fruit growing going on. Last week we were in the fields with the sheep and the shepherd; this week we're in the vineyard with the grapes, vines and the gardener.

Now, I am not a gardener – at all! I know very little about plants – flowers or vegetables – I don't have a garden and don't really want one. The landscaping that we do have in the yard requires the bare minimum maintenance and even that I don't keep up with. I'm happy to mow the lawn and rake the leaves, but the art of tending a garden escapes me.

So every time this passage comes around I learn something new. Those of you who are gardeners will know much of this already; but maybe there are some other non-gardeners like me here.

The metaphor Jesus gives us is a vine with branches, and the pruning that is required to encourage not just the growth of the vine but, more importantly, the fruit that will grow on it. Pruning, I have learned, is not just cutting out the dead branches; it is removing certain healthy growing branches so that other branches may flourish.

In order to prune a grape tree, the vine grower needs to first examine all the branches, choosing the ones which are inhibiting or in the way of the healthiest branches that will bear the healthiest grapes. Sometimes this is determined by the direction in which the branch is growing, sometimes it has to do with the size and shape of the branch. Then the vine grower, carefully and by hand, cuts the branches away. And it takes 6-8 years for a new grape tree to begin to produce grapes for wine.

I happened across a landscaping show on TV recently in which the host was showing someone how to prune a crabapple tree. What I learned was that the purpose of pruning is to make the branches less dense so that light can get to the inside of the tree to help it grow.

He also used a word, which surprised me. He was always mindful that the way they cut the branch off had to be done so that the tree could heal from being cut. Heal – he said it over and over. The long-term health of the tree required a short-term pain.

Pruning, I now know, involves cutting off pieces of a plant to make room for future growth, or to channel its growth in a certain direction so that the plant can focus its energies on growth that will be more robust, aesthetically pleasing, or produce more fruit.

If a tree or shrub is not pruned properly it will grow so full of itself that it will become unhealthy, and not produce the fruit or flower it is meant to produce, and eventually it will die.

Keep all this in mind and listen again to our Gospel lesson:

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.

I think there are three things going on here – pruning, remaining, and bearing fruit.

Pruning. There are all sorts of things that need to be pruned...all sorts of things that can sap the strength and vitality of a congregation – unresolved conflicts, fears and anxieties, even that old..."but we've always done it this way" mentality – and for the health and vitality of the whole these things need to be removed.

Remember years ago when we removed the front pews here? There was nothing wrong with them, they were perfectly healthy pews. But the then new handbell choir and the large number of children in worship, required some pruning.

We may also need some personal pruning as well. Perhaps you need to remove (or have something removed) from your life so that you may thrive in another area - a relationship or a job.

And yes this can be painful - healing is often a painful process...but it is a life-giving, life-sustaining process undertaken with great care and love by the master gardener himself so that his plants and shrubs and trees ... his garden...his not ours...will bear fruit worthy of his name.

Helpful here is that the word for prune in v. 2 is the same as the word for cleanse in v.3. There's something about pruning that is like being cleansed.

The second point of this passage has to do with **remaining** - and for Jesus this is about remaining attached to him. Jesus (the vine) and the followers (the branches) must remain attached. *He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.* (v. 5b)

In the Jewish tradition of Jesus' day, the vine was a picture of Israel. We hear of it all through the Psalms and in the Prophets. Now Jesus is saying that HE is the true vine. He is the one on whom God's purposes are now resting. And so his followers are members of God's true people – if they belong to him and remain "in" him. The picture of the vine isn't just a clever illustration from gardening. It is about who Jesus and his people really are, and what is now going to happen to them as a result of their relationship.

This remaining / abiding was very important to Jesus' friends. Remember, this was his "last lecture" before he died, and he worried about what would happen to them after he left them.

Jesus hadn't come to earth just to spend a few good years sharing wisdom for daily living. He wanted to ensure that the relationship his disciples had with him would survive after he died.

Jesus' followers are God's true people because we belong to HIM. The church may be the people; but we do not belong to ourselves – we belong to God. The key is "remaining" in him – remaining on the vine.

The question is – How do we remain in him? What does it look like in practice? Two things:

First, we must remain a people of personal prayer and worship in our private lives. And our personal relationships with Jesus are best nurtured through prayer and reading the Bible. This is how we ensure our inmost thoughts and attitudes will be shaped by God's Word. A good start is nightly prayer and a daily devotion which comes to your email inbox.

Second, we must remain in the community that knows and loves him and celebrates him as its Lord. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian – we can't go it alone. Our identity as a branch is meaningless without being part of the vine. When we abide in the vine, life has meaning; when we attempt to stand alone as a branch, we wither.

The story goes about the old man who had once been active in his church but stopped going after his wife had died. Years and years went by, he would show up a few times a year perhaps and his pastor

would visit him occasionally. One cold winter day, the pastor was visiting in his home and they were sitting before the fireplace drinking their coffee. As they chatted the pastor got up and took the fireplace tongs, grabbed a small red hot piece of wood and placed it on the edge of the hearth. As their conversation continued the ember slowly went out.

And then there is the **bearing fruit**...keeping our mind on Christ and loving him more deeply changes us - both as individuals and as a church. And we bear the fruit that is the result of being in Christ: kindness, generosity, patience, and love.

We remain on the vine through worship (word and sacrament), our own individual prayer and Bible reading, and lives lived for others.

Sharing Christ ~ Changing Lives

Notice the three main ways we do this here and how they exemplify this.

Creating a Christian foundation for families - because that's the largest demographic in Groton

Learning more about Jesus - that's remaining in him and on the vine.

Living our faith beyond our walls - that's bearing fruit.

And we actually have an opportunity before us to bear fruit in a new way:

Loaves & Fishes, the food pantry a couple towns over, which serves our area, has for many years been running a backpack program (well actually a volunteer and her friends), which provides school supplies for families in the area. As *L&F* is refocusing on their mission, which is to feed people, they are looking for someone else to own the backpack program. And we are considering it.

For years you've been donating supplies and backpacks, and now we have the opportunity to bear even more fruit and make the program a ministry of our church. As we think, pray, and talk about it, it does seem to align with our mission and purpose.

Pruning - Remaining - Bearing Fruit

I don't think it needs to be too complicated.

Perhaps it really is simple.

Branches depend on the vine for sustenance, and plants bear fruit.

God's people are nourished in Jesus Christ and his church.

And fruit is born.

Amen.