

Fruitfully Connected to Christ

A sermon by the Rev. Dr. Jon M. Fancher
Rocky River Presbyterian Church, Rocky River, Ohio
May 2, 2021—Fifth Sunday in Eastertide

- 1st Letter of John 4:11-16 (Common English Bible)

¹¹ Dear friends, if God loved us this way, we also ought to love each other. ¹² No one has ever seen God. If we love each other, God remains in us and his love is made perfect in us. ¹³ This is how we know we remain in him and he remains in us, because he has given us a measure of his Spirit.

¹⁴ We have seen and testify that the Father has sent the Son to be the savior of the world. ¹⁵ If any of us confess that Jesus is God's Son, God remains in us and we remain in God. ¹⁶ We have known and have believed the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who remain in love remain in God and God remains in them.

- Gospel of John 15:1-6 (Good News Translation)

¹ "I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit.

³ You have been made clean already by the teaching I have given you. ⁴ Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it can do so only if it remains in the vine. In the same way you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me. ⁶ Those who do not remain in me are thrown out like a branch and dry up; such branches are gathered up and thrown into the fire, where they are burned.

Today's gospel reading from John Chapter 15 has a unique distinction in human history. Who knows? It could pop up in a trivia contest someday. If the question were asked, "What was the first verse of Christian scripture to be spoken from the surface of the Moon?" you could answer: "*John 15, verse 5: 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Whosoever abides in me will bring forth much fruit....'*"

Jesus used this vine-and-branches allegory to describe his relation to his disciples and followers. The process of growing grapes for wine would have been familiar to everyone in that agrarian society. Even if you were a fisherman on the Sea of Galilee, or you were a cobbler plying your trade in the middle of bustling Jerusalem, you would have been familiar with the grape-growing process: vines coming off the trunk of the plant, and branches leading off the vines, laden with fruit and leaves.

Here are three thoughts we can take away from Christ's familiar allegory of a vineyard.

First, in order to serve God's purpose with the life we've been given, we need to remain connected to Jesus just as a branch needs to remain connected to its vine. Jesus acknowledged that sometimes deadwood forms among the branches. Maybe by trauma, or by neglect, its connection with the vine is broken, so it ceases to be able to contribute to producing fruit.

Jesus said that the gardener breaks off that deadwood, gathers it up and throws it into the fire. That sounds ominous, yet even then deadwood is not without its usefulness: after all, fueling a fire can provide for a meal, or warmth against the chill of

a desert night, or heat for forging metal. Even deadwood has a use, but it certainly is not fruit-bearing.

Commenting on the Christian's need to remain rooted in Christ, church sociologist Herb Miller has written,

The branch does not need to get up every morning and say to itself, "I must work hard, or there will be no grapes." The branch's power comes from staying connected to the vine. In the same way, God gives us spiritual growth as a gift, through the power of the Holy Spirit, as we connect and stay connected with Christ.¹

That's what Jesus was urging when he declared, "I am the vine, and you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit; for you can do nothing without me."²

Here's a second idea from the vine-and-branches allegory. Just as a branch may need to be pruned or tied up in order to make it more productive, from time to time we will need some training or discipline or correction so that we fulfill our role as branches of our Lord and Master Jesus.

This pandemic has been a time of pruning, don't you think? During the pandemic everyone has had to reinvent what they were so accustomed to doing. This has been true for teachers and children in school – or not in school; for sit-down restaurants transforming to carry-out counters; for bankers and customers learning to rely on drive-through lanes and ATMS and online banking; for churches figuring out how a congregation of the faithful can continue to be a congregation when congregating was not practical.

For our church, this pandemic has become a time of pruning. We've eliminated some activities that probably had had their time and were ready to be trimmed. We've also had to put on hold some activities that were productive and enjoyable in order to focus on what's essential. This cutting back – this pruning – has been difficult in some ways. But I think that we will find our church healthier going forward, better positioned to be more fruitful in the days ahead.

And can't the benefit of pruning be beneficial for us individually too?

- I've heard many people say that some "busyness" has been eliminated from their lives and they feel better for it. They've been able to focus time on their family, or they've had more quiet time for themselves.
- Others have taken this unexpected period of calm in their lives and used it to explore personal disciplines like praying during a daily walk around the block, or dusting off the old Bible and reading it in some systematic way.
- I've heard from a good number of people who have used this time to take stock of their world and decided to declutter their lives of excessive entanglements or of physical belongings that were smothering them rather than blessing them.

¹ Herb Miller, *Connecting With God: 14 Ways Churches Can Help People Grow Spiritually* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 15 in Homiletics.com Illustrations: Vineyard at <https://www.homileticsonline.com/members/search?keywords=Vine&bookId=&topicId=&searchType=6> accessed 4/26/2021

² John 15:5 Good News Translation

- I know of folks who have consciously decided to use their relatively good fortune to be sure to support our church's mission projects or community charitable programs.

So like a vine's branches may need to be tied up, redirected, pruned and cleaned up, in the same way our ability to remain rooted in the way of Jesus may benefit from some correction and discipline.

A third thought: Our purpose is not simply to be a branch with a connection to Jesus. Yes, we are branches being fed by our source Jesus Christ. But branches are not fruit. We branches are not the fruit Jesus seeks to fill the world with. We are the means by which Christ's fruit comes into the world.

Think how grapes grace a table: they bring life-enriching fruit or juice or wine. In the same way, Jesus wants us to enrich our lives, our families, our communities with the fruit, the qualities he talked about and modeled for us.

- The fruit of mercy shown to one can become mercy that one shows to another, and yet another.
- The fruit of compassion shown to one can inspire that one to act with compassion toward others.
- The fruits of acceptance and respect shown to a stranger can break down barriers that divide and begin forging friendships.
- The fruit of expressing gratitude multiplies by blessing the heart of both the recipient and the giver.
- The fruit of one's faithful devotion to God is a witness inviting others to recognize and acknowledge God's blessing in their lives, too.

No, we are not the fruit, but our connection with Jesus yields fruit. "When we are connected to Jesus we bear the fruit of Jesus."³

Jesus said, "Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you."⁴ That is not merely the heart and soul of his little allegory about the vine and branches. "Remain united to me, and I will remain united to you" is the heart and soul of our Christian faith.⁵

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³ Melissa Earley, Living by the Word in *Christian Century*, April 6, 2021 at <https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-2-easter-5b-john-151-8> accessed 4/26/2021

⁴ John 15:4a Good News Translation

⁵ Floyd V. Filson, *The Layman's Bible Commentary: Vol. 19--John*. Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1963, 149.