

“John: Bearing Fruit”

Ezekiel 15:1-8 • John 15:1-17

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX
Rev. Dr. Charles S. Blackshear • January 7, 2024

A few years ago, Leslie and I were invited by a former member of this church to spend a few days in Napa Valley, California. I had the privilege of preaching on Sunday and Wednesday at First Presbyterian there and the pastor and his wife took us to visit some of the wineries, which is what Napa is known for, and we had the opportunity to take the tour of one of the larger ones, including touring the vineyard. I have to tell you, seeing the vineyard in person and talking to the tour guide really made this passage come alive for me.

This passage in John 15 takes place after Jesus has celebrated the Passover meal, the Last Supper, with his disciples in that upper room. Judas has already gone off to betray Jesus and Jesus knows that his time is short. John 14 ends with Jesus saying “Get up. Let’s go from here.” They start heading to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus will be arrested. Along the way they can clearly see the Temple. Historians from that time tell us that one of the prominent features of the Temple was a large decorative carving of a grape vine over the entryway into the Holy Place. In the Old Testament the grape vine is a symbol of the nation of Israel. Isaiah 5 says, “My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines.” We find similar language in Psalm 80 and also Jeremiah 2.

Perhaps this is where Jesus pauses to continue teaching his closest followers. Looking across the valley toward the Temple he says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.” In other words, Jesus is saying that he is the fulfillment of everything that God had set Israel apart to do. What God wanted was for Israel to be a blessing to the rest of the world. Sadly they frequently failed to do that. But Jesus fulfills that calling. He is God’s blessing to the whole world.

Jesus continues, “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every

branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” This seems a little confusing until he says, “I am the vine; *you* are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” That means what he’s saying about pruning and cutting off applies to *you*. And to me. Here’s where that vineyard tour we took really helps.

Grapes are generally grown in long rows on some kind of trellis or wire. Those grown for wine are not very big at all – maybe five feet high or so with the plants spaced about 6 feet apart. The vine is basically the trunk of the grape plant. Out of the vine, in each direction, are the branches. They’re also called canes. Grapes grow on one-year-old branches, on last year’s growth. So every year before the plants sprout new leaves in the spring the vinedresser must go along and prune the branches. He’s trying to get the right balance between the number of new shoots and the number of flower buds. Too many shoots will mean too many leaves shading the fruit preventing it from ripening. Not enough shoots means not enough branches for next year’s fruit. Then as the grapes are growing he must prune if there are too many leaves and they even must prune away any of the clusters of grapes that are not developing properly. The vinedresser may end up tending each row of grapes twenty times during a growing season.

Like they are today, even in Jesus’ time grapes were usually grafted. They would graft the variety of grape they wanted to grow onto a different rootstock, maybe one that was better suited to the soil in that area. One of the things the vinedresser had to watch for was branches growing out of the rootstock. Those branches would not produce the same kind of grapes or maybe not any at all. But they would take nutrients away from the rest of the plant. Those are usually called suckers. The vinedresser had to cut away any suckers as well as any diseased branches or branches that were putting on too many leaves but no fruit.

That's what God's doing in our lives every day. Our Heavenly Father is the vinedresser. He's actively involved in our spiritual growth. That means he has to cut away unproductive things in our lives – addictions, anger, bitterness, greed. Sin gets in the way of our serving Jesus and it has to go. But then God also prunes us. If you've ever done any gardening you know that cutting away unhealthy branches and pruning healthy ones sometimes looks alike. You use the same tools in the same way. But you do it with different purposes. One is to get rid of something that doesn't belong, something unhealthy. The other is to encourage the plant to do more of what it is designed to do. The purpose of a vineyard is fruit, specifically grapes. The purpose of a Christian is also fruit. God prunes us so that we may bear more fruit. Verse 8 says, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."

So the logical question then is what kind of fruit is God looking for from you? Theologians have debated this for a long time but I think the best answer is found in Galatians 5: "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." The fruit that God is looking for is for those things to be increasing in your life. You should be able to honestly say that you are increasing in those qualities. Other people should be able to say that you are increasing in the qualities of love and joy and peace. As a follower of Jesus you should be known for your kindness and patience and self-control.

Have you ever *tried* to be more patient or to have more peace? You really can't. That's because the fruit of the Spirit is just that – it's the *fruit*, the result of God working in your life. So how can you have this fruit in your life? Jesus says, "Abide in me, and I in you." The way to see God at work in your life and in your relationships is to stay close to Jesus. In verse 5 he says, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."

Your mission in life is to become more and more like Jesus. Jesus' mission as the true vine is to fulfill God's mandate to bless the world. In the same way the Father sent the Son, the Son sends us to bless the world and to reverse the effects of sin. We do that with love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

In the rest of our passage Jesus mentions two of these and really focuses on one of them, which makes me think that one is the most important. First, in verse 11 he says, "These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full." Joy is a funny thing. It's not the same as happiness. Your happiness usually depends on your circumstances. Nobody is happy all the time. But you CAN have joy all the time. Joy comes from a close relationship with Jesus, from hearing Jesus call you a friend. And that kind of relationship comes through spending time in God's word, in prayer, and with other believers, which leads to the second thing Jesus focuses on – love.

Abiding, remaining close to Jesus, also means remaining close to all the other branches. As the church, we are to be as close to one another as branches are to the vine. In verse 9 Jesus says, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love." He explains that abiding in his love will lead us to keep his commandments joyfully. Then in verse 12 he says, "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In other words, Jesus is saying, "I have loved you the same way that the Father has loved me. Now I want you to love other people that same way." That's all there is to being a Christian. All you have to do is love the most difficult, unlovable people the way that Jesus loves you.

How does Jesus love you? Completely, unconditionally, and sacrificially. In verse 13 he says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends." That's what Jesus did for us 2000 years ago. He took your place and my place on the cross. As

Hebrews 12 says, “for the joy that was set before him endured the cross.” Jesus gave up everything so that you could experience God’s complete love. And he asks us to sacrifice our time, our money, our comfort, so that others can experience that same love. But we can’t do it alone. We are only able to love people like that because the Holy Spirit is working in our lives. We can only bear fruit when we are closely connected to Jesus because apart from Him we can do nothing.

Amen.