

## “Community-Living in Christ”

John 15:1-5

First Presbyterian Church  
September 13, 2020

In the book “First Things First: To Live, to Love, to Learn, to Leave a Legacy,” Roger Merrill tells of a busy man who decided to landscape his property. He hired a woman with a doctorate in horticulture, and told her he needed a maintenance-free garden with automatic sprinklers and other hands-free devices, since he was too busy to do the upkeep. Finally she stopped him and said, “There’s one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there’s no gardener, there is no garden!”<sup>1</sup>

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus likens the community of faith to a vineyard, saying, “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.” Of course, in this illustration, we are the branches, the disciples of Jesus are the branches.

Jesus uses the vineyard as an illustration for two reasons. First, vineyards were everywhere in 1<sup>st</sup> century Palestine. Everyone knew exactly what he was talking about. Second, over the entrance to the Temple in Jerusalem, which was rebuilt by King Herod, there hung a golden grapevine.

As described at that time by the historian Josephus, “The spacious entrance to the holy place had folding doors.... Above the entrance was a golden vine with (grape) clusters as large as a man.”<sup>2</sup> When Jesus talked about grapevines, everyone knew what he was talking about. But do we?

I mean, Jesus found himself in competition with the societal hierarchy of his time and the Roman government when it came to the hearts and minds of his followers, just like we, as Christians, find ourselves struggling with relevancy in our society and how best our government can do its job.

For the disciples gathered around Jesus that day, the Hebrew tradition may have said that the temple priest was the only way to God, but Jesus said otherwise. The Roman Empire may have said that Caesar was the source of all that was good and noble in society, but Jesus said otherwise.

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<sup>1</sup> Based on a story by A. Rober Merrill in Steven R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First: To Live. To Learn, to Leave a Legacy* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1994), 77.

<sup>2</sup> Josephus, *Ant*, XV, xi, 3; *BJ*, V, v, 4, <https://www.bible-history.com/isbe/t/temple%2c+a2/>

Jesus told his disciples – including us – that he is the only way to stay connected to God, and that God is the true source of all that is holy and good. And to make sure we know this and live our lives accordingly, he used a vineyard as an illustration. There are three things you need to know about vineyards.

First, the vine-grower selects the best vine imaginable to raise up the best branches possible. Second, to keep those branches healthy, he cleans and prunes them continually. And third, this care and nurture is what enables the branches to produce fruit, abundant and good fruit.

Again, Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and our ministry is the fruit. So, what can we do to ensure that we bear good fruit, that our community of faith continues to grow, continues to produce the fruit – the blessings – of Jesus?

Jesus gives us the answer when he says, “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 says Jesus, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

Or, to put it another way, attached to me – connected to Jesus – we can do much – much good in our homes and out in the community. What is it to bear much fruit on behalf of Jesus? Well, the fruits of the spirit are...: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Thank you. Well done.

When it comes to living together in our homes and in our community, who couldn't use a little more ...: Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control? Yes, we all could, and certainly our world needs a little more Jesus – a lot more Jesus. In order to have more Jesus in our lives and in our world, we have to stay connected to Jesus, through worship, Sunday school, Bible studies, personal devotions and mission outreach.

You know, it's easy to take for granted our opportunities for worship, Sunday school, Bible study, personal devotions and Christian service. In fact, many people claim they can do good apart from the church. And of course, that's true. And yet, it is only by the grace of God that we live in a society – in a world – where the Spirit of Christ lives and moves and is active beyond the walls of this and other churches.

I mean, it is the church after all – the community of faith – that God established through Jesus Christ, upon which God poured out his Spirit, and through which God would nurture all people in the faith.

Those who forsake opportunities to be nurtured in the faith, they are choosing to live apart from the Spirit of God, apart from the community of faith. When we choose to live apart from the Spirit of God we are like a branch detached from the grapevine. Do you know what that branch is like, when it's detached from the grapevine? Anybody want to guess? When it comes to actual grape vines? And their branches?

No, it's not dead. It still lives, at least for awhile. And if nourished with water and replanted in good soil, it grows and produces good fruit. But it can't do that on its own. It needs to be nurtured and cared for by the vine-grower, just like we need to be nurtured and cared for by God.

Jesus, when he talked about the nurture and care of God, he likened it to the nurture and care of the vine-grower. "Every branch that bears fruit," says Jesus, the vine-grower "prunes to make it bear more fruit." What Jesus is saying is that God is constantly tending to our spiritual growth, helping us to be the best we can be, as long as we stay connected to Jesus – connected to the community of faith that he gave rise to – and allow that connection to help us grow and mature as faithful, active Christians.

Do you know what happens to a grapevine in the wild, apart from the vine-grower, apart from God, so to speak? Grapevine branches that are left on their own get overgrown. They produce more and more leaves and shoots and that take nutrients away from the grapes. Sometimes, they even block the fruit from sun, and that produces sour grapes.

So, the best way to tell if a branch is receiving the care and nurture of the vine-grower – if you are growing in the faith – is to look at the fruit produced. Is there much fruit, or only a little? Sweet grapes or sour?

Jesus wants us to look at ourselves as branches on the true vine that is Christ, tended by the vine-grower who is God. He wants us to claim our place within the community of faith, so that we receive the nurture and care it has to offer, the growth it promotes.

And he wants us to do that – not so we become leafy, overgrown branches – but so that we produce good fruit, and produce it in abundance. "You have already been cleaned (or pruned)," says Jesus, cleaned and pruned "by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me," says Jesus, "as I abide in you."

Living in Christ – living in the community of faith – and allowing God to form us and shape us through our participation in the church, this is the only way we produce the fruit – the blessings – of the Christian faith. Amen.

## Pastoral Prayer

Lord our God, we your people come to you this day fully aware that we need your presence and your help in our lives, yet aware, as well, that we often fail to stop and turn to you for that help.

We get caught up in the troubles and the turmoil of daily living – we become busy with the goals that we have set for ourselves, and those that come to us from our work and our families and our friends.

We strive to be loving, we seek joy and peace, we desire to be gentle and patient and kind, to show goodness, and to have self-control – and yet these things all too often elude us.

Help us, Lord, to root ourselves more deeply in you; to seek your will for our lives; to stop and listen for your voice when we are troubled; to fully rely on you when we strive to do what is right; to remember you and trust in you when we are lost; to meditate on your goodness and your gracious will when we begin each day – so that like trees by a stream which send down their roots to the water, we may produce by your power the fruit of your Spirit.

We pray, too, O Lord, that others would be rooted in you, cared for and nurtured by your Spirit, especially those who are struggling with illness and disease, with uncertainty and adversity, with loneliness and grief. Let them know you are with them and bring them to wholeness and joy.

We ask all this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who taught us to pray together saying:

**Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.  
Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts,  
as we forgive our debtors;  
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.  
For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen**