

# The Fruit Of Our Faith

John 15:1-8

April 28, 2024

## John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit

God 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.

## **The Fruit Of Our Faith**

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

Rev. Michael Catanzaro

### **I.**

Here in this morning's scripture from John 15, we find Jesus reaching for his favorite tool, the parable. A parable is a succinct, didactic story (that is, something meant to teach) written either in prose or verse, which is used to illustrate a principle or offer a lesson. Typically, the meaning of a parable is accessible to just about every listener, but deeper truths emerge with a fuller and more nuanced understanding of the context. Using today's parable as an example, these deeper truths might be lost on those who no longer immersed in an agricultural setting. Whereas fables use animals, plants, inanimate objects, or forces of nature as characters, a parable employs human characters; such as the vinegrower in this morning's passage. So, it is with the vinegrower that we will begin.

### **II.**

Looking at the original Greek, we find the word *γεωργός* (gheh-ore-gos) which is more generally translated as "vinedresser." In contrast to the vintner, who is the *winegrower* or wine producer, the *vinegrower* provides the grapes which become the wine, but not the wine itself. However, the vinegrower doesn't just cultivate the grapes or the vine, she cultivates the *entire* vineyard; doing so in such a way as to provide the best possible grapes to serve as the raw material which another will utilize to create the wine. Admittedly this is a nuanced distinction, but quite important for our purposes today; and, I believe, for Jesus' purposes in telling this parable. Whereas the *vintner* is concerned with harvesting, crushing and pressing, fermentation, clarification, and then aging and bottling, the *vinegrower* is concerned with the cultivation of the vine, soil quality, pest control and, of course, pruning.

### **III.**

Simply put, pruning is the removal of "canes" (the woody vine branches that are at least two years old) and "spurs" (younger branches, usually one year old) that occurs between growing seasons, sometime during late winter or early spring when the vines are still dormant. Unless such pruning is

occurring on a regular and consistent basis, a grapevine will sprawl and spread itself out, producing as many leaves and as much fruit as it can. This might *sound* good, the more grapes the better, right? But, left unchecked grapevines yield more grapes than the vinedresser and vintner desire; huge crops can ripen unevenly and usually result in grapes that lack the intensity of flavor needed to make great wine. Also, by preventing vines from overcrowding the vinegrower ensures that the grapes will have plenty of room for air to circulate, which helps prevent mildew and rot.

#### **IV.**

In short, pruning helps focus the vine's energy on producing a smaller volume of the best grapes possible. Beyond cane and spur pruning, however, the vinegrower must also undertake "canopy management" through leaf pulling and other methods of controlling vine vigor, to groom the leaves and shoots that surround grape clusters in an effort to optimize their sun exposure and the flow of air around them. A final responsibility of the vinegrower is called "green harvesting": the practice of dropping excess clusters of unripe grapes during the growing season to reduce yields and concentrate flavors in the remaining grapes. It is almost certain that those listening to Jesus would be well familiar with all of this, the science of which is called "viticulture." With this information now in hand, we can return to our parable and begin harvesting the lesson it intends to teach.

#### **V.**

The parable of the Vine and the Branches paints a picture of God as the vinegrower, Christ as the true vine, while we, the faithful, are understood to be the branches. Clearly, the purpose of this relationship is to produce fruit, and a lot of it, as a means of glorifying God who, as the vinegrower, is responsible for the vineyard and, by extension, the fruit it yields. Interestingly, though, this parable of Jesus also raises a few questions which, seemingly, are left unanswered:

- What and/or where is the vineyard?
- Is the purpose of the vineyard only the sheer *quantity* of fruit produced, or does the *quality* of the fruit matter as well?
- What, exactly, does this metaphorical fruit represent in the real world?
- And, perhaps most important, though it would seem it is the yield which serves to glorify God, what becomes the actual harvest of fruit; that is, what is its intended use?

## VI.

As Presbyterians, we claim to strive for what is termed “an informed faith.” Sometimes, though, this leads us to “overthink” things, and this may well be the case today in trying to address these unanswered questions. However, I believe history has shown, particularly in regard to this *specific* Presbyterian congregation, we’d prefer to err on the side of over-thinking, rather than under-thinking. So, let us proceed to over-think this.

Though we might be tempted to understand the vineyard as the entire world, a better guess is that the vineyard represents the church; that place where God is at work in Christ, and home to the body of Christ’s believers. Though God is certainly at work in *all* the world, the church is that place which is *uniquely* designed and designated to bear the fruit that glorifies God, as this is our purpose in being called together by the Spirit.

## VII.

As the vineyard, the church is meant to be “Results Orientated.” Though the vineyard may *look* beautiful, with verdant rows of green set against rolling amber hills all drenched in sunlight, or tall steeples, impressive facades, soaring arches and brilliantly colored stained glass, our purpose isn’t to impress or inspire but to produce the fruit of the vine. I have known plenty of churches with peeling paint, humble furnishings, and untended lawns which boldly glorify God with the sweet fruit they yield.

Examples of such small, specialty vineyards also answer for us the second of our lingering questions: bigger doesn’t not necessarily mean better, and less can often times be much more. It isn’t just *quantity* that matters, as it is also the *quality* of the fruit yielded that ultimately defines the harvest. Much good is often outweighed by even a little great (or a little grape).

## VIII.

We arrive now at a consideration of the fruit. Metaphorically, what is being represented by the grapes in this parable? Generally speaking, we might consider them to stand for the fruits of the Spirit as Paul articulates in Galatians chapter 5: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, and self-control.

Pushing the analogy even further, however, we might understand different varietals suited and matched for particular palates or certain occasions. A light and fruity Pinot Grigio for the refreshment and glee of Christian fellowship. A full-bodied Cabernet Sauvignon or Merlot to accompany those hard places and deep questions which confront us at certain points on the journey. A sweet, sparkling wine or champagne to accompany the joy that comes with forgiveness, grace, and hope. And finally, a dessert wine like Madeira when we rest fully sated in gratefulness to savor the blessings of our lives.

## **IX.**

Interestingly, though, it is not the vine, or Christ, which bears the fruit. Instead, this privilege and responsibility is given over to the faithful who are the branches which spring forth from the one, true vine. That is, of course, only if the vinegrower has carefully tended, trimmed and pruned.

Unfortunately, this aspect of the parable is one to which we have no trouble relating. We have all experienced occasions when we have been cut back, thinned, and forced to grow anew. Those times in our lives when the grapes turn sour, and changes must be made not only to boost the yield, but, moreover, to sweeten the grape. Periods when the canopy we've constructed, and under which we have tried to hide, comes to be removed so as to allow the winds of the Spirit to circulate more freely around us, and the truth of God's light to shine more directly upon us.

## **X.**

While Jesus is clear that this whole interwoven and interdependent process is intended, first and foremost, to glorify God the vinegrower, the most interesting question introduced by the parable (for me, at least) is what becomes the actual harvest of fruit? Throughout the Bible, God is consistently portrayed as a pragmatist who plays the long-game. Though it may take years, generations or eons to achieve, there is always a purpose or a goal to every divine action and endeavor. While it is certainly *possible* that life in the vineyard, the church, is simply an end unto itself, this would be a radical departure from scriptural precedent and, hence, a dubious conclusion to draw.

And, so, we arrive at our final unanswered question. That is, what is the intended use for the fruit? And, in keeping with the analogy the parable presents, who or what is the vintner that ultimately gets to decide how the fruit is finally utilized (or brought to “fruition”)?

## **XI.**

I believe the answer is to be found right here in our midst, as I believe the vintner is *you*; not the church in general, or a particular congregation, but every individual disciple of the true vine. Not only are we the branches that are groomed and pruned to produce the fruit, each of us is also the vintner charged with both the responsibility and the privilege of deciding what to do with the fruit which is yielded from the vineyard, the church.

Simply put, what shall do with the fruit, how will we “value add” to the harvest? What is the artful process we will concoct, undertake, and implement in order to create our own uniquely individual product and bring it to market? Said another way, what is the mission that springs forth from our faith and how will we use it, enjoy it, and share it with the world?

## **XII.**

I don’t know about you, but for me, this is the *fun* part of the faith. It is so unfortunate that the spiritual life is all too often only understood as an onus and an obligation; something which requires great sacrifice, tremendous discipline and, generally, perceived to be something we do for others. While this is true to a certain degree, the very best part of the faith journey is the joy that comes from using the fruit of the vine in our own lives, in our own relationships, in our own homes, and in the world right outside our very own doors. Doing so is not an act of selfishness, it is both a sign of respect for the vine, for Christ’s sacrifice on the cross, and serves to honor the vinegrower, for the God who cares for, prunes and cultivates us. The fun we have with the fruit of our faith is an critical component of our Christian mission. It is also one of the best ways we have of glorifying God and growing as disciples of Christ. Amen.