

How many of you have had experience pruning a grape vine?

It can be pretty precise work, can't it?

When grape vines bud and grow, they send out shoots all over the place and will really take off if you let them. I used to trim my grandmother's vine when I was younger. In the fall, she would encourage me to prune the vine almost entirely back to the main branch. By that point, it was probably at least 20 years old and had a thick, gnarly trunk growing from a single root system in the middle of the arbor. When I was done, it didn't look like anything could possibly recover from a hacking like that. Yet, if I cut it way back as she taught me, it would be loaded with juicy grapes every year, which translated into many a jar of my grandmother's homemade jelly.

With grapevines, the age is not as big a factor as is the proper pruning. Grapes do well when they stay close to the main vine so they can get the greatest concentration of essential nutrients to develop and ripen. In fact, the world's longest grape vine is at Hampton Court Palace in England. It is over 120 feet long and at its base is 13 feet around, as well as being 250 years old this year. Yet it has been expertly trimmed all those years and is still laden with the sweetest grapes each and every season.

A seasoned gardener can make a grapevine produce no matter how many years it has put behind it. It all comes down to the closeness of the main vine. It's about being tapped into the source of the best energy for growth.

There's a story about a missionary in Africa who lived in his central mission which had a small generator to supply current for his church and a small rectory. Some natives from an outlying mission came to visit the pastor. They noticed the electric light hanging from the ceiling of his living room. They watched wide-eyed as he turned the little switch and the light went on. One of the visitors asked if he could have one of the bulbs. The priest, thinking he wanted it for a sort of trinket, gave him one of the extra bulbs. On his next visit to the outlying mission, the priest stopped at the hut of the man who had asked for the bulb. Imagine his surprise when he saw the bulb hanging from an ordinary string. He had to explain that one needed to have electricity and a wire to bring the current to the bulb. We may share an understanding smile at the innocence of the African native, but we may not be much better. [TURN OFF/SLIDE]

In our text for today, Jesus tells a story about the importance of our connection to the true source of life. He uses the analogy of the vineyard of the vine and the branches. Just as the electricity provides the power necessary for the bulb to produce light,

so the vine provides the life necessary for the branches to produce fruit. In our gospel story today, Jesus likens us to those shoots that emerge from the main vine in Spring and stresses the importance of the fruit we bear.

There's a lot we could unpack from the imagery these metaphors provide. First of all, there's the vital need for the branches to be close to the vine. How much of our lives are guided by Jesus? It's easy to think that we go through the

necessary faith motions: we show up for church every Sunday we can, we tithe regularly, we may even have a regular routine of bible study and prayer in our lives. And don't get me wrong, those are all wonderful practices and activities. But is the routine, the "going through the motions," what makes us valuable branches? Or does it involve a little more?

Too often, we make our faith just another part of our daily, or weekly lives. We schedule it in our day like we would a trip to the grocery store; on Sundays it's another errand we have to run. We give it attention in the time we allot for it, then go about the rest of our lives. As Americans, we tend to be fiercely independent folks. We are individuals first, and our personal priorities take precedence. Maybe it's our pioneering history that creates this sense of individualism, of doing for ourselves and focusing on our own individual priorities and journeys. In telling this story, though, Jesus is stressing that our faith is not something that we work into our schedules. We are to "remain in him and he in us, or abide in him," as other translations word it. That is a 24/7 arrangement, not something we parcel out.

So what does it look like to be an active branch on the vine?

What does this mutual abiding look like?

What does bearing full, juicy fruit really mean?

It doesn't mean we allot a set time to our faith like every other aspect of our lives.

Our faith should permeate and guide every aspect of our lives. Let's remember that God is the vinegrower. God is the one pruning those branches that bear

fruit, and cutting away the ones that don't. Our epistle reading this morning goes to great length to tell us what is important to God, what God is all about. "God is love, and those who live in love live in God, and God in them." We only truly know God when the love of God flows through us. God's love is self-sacrificing. The Greek word used for God in this passage is "agape." Unlike our English language, Greek has four distinct words for love. Agape is the one that is used to mean caring for the good of another. Like shalom, its chief concern is the well-being of the other. It's putting our own interests aside.

There's a reason our meal at love feast is called the "agape meal." We eat that meal after we have humbled ourselves in service to others. Likewise, God has shown this self-sacrifice in his love for us, even to death on a cross. This "love of God" that is to abide in us is the antithesis of fear. We often think of hate as the opposite of love, but hate has fear as its underlying core. When we think of hate groups and discrimination, at their core is fear. The fear of change, of losing importance, of losing one's privilege and status in the culture. That fear becomes anger and hate towards what is perceived as a threat to one's "normal way of life." Yet in 1 John, we are told that "there is no fear in love, but perfect love drives out fear..." So if we abide in the love of God, we cannot abide in hate and fear. Do our actions support that? Do we still fear what's different from us, what may challenge what we consider to be "normal?" Do we find ourselves thinking less of those who are different than us: those whose culture or religious

practices, skin color, or identities are different from what we've always considered the norm?

That brings me to the second item we can unpack from this metaphor of being branches on the Christ vine. As all being branches sprouting from the love of God through Christ, the walk of faith we are called to is inherently a communal walk. What we do affects the other branches on the vine. John tells us in our epistle reading this morning that the one thing we can't do is to claim to love God while refusing the love the sister or brother in front of us. Love and hate cannot mix. Here John points us to the two great parallel commandments: love God and love your neighbor. These two are tied together, John tells us. Not only must we obey them both; it is impossible to obey the first without also obeying the second. We are all branches of the same vine, all the fruit we bear supports the vine, the body of Christ.

Ours is a faith founded on community, not individualism. When we allow ourselves to become too stuck on the modern idea of the sovereign individual, we can too easily see our life in community to be outside the central places of our lives. The church and our faith become something we are "part of", apart from our major spheres of life in the world, at home, at work, in our families, etc. The imagery of the vine suggests otherwise. It is the nourishment we get from our faith walk together that should drive all other aspects of our lives. Part of the problem is we have come to see "the church" over time, as tied to a building and the events that transpire there. That is why the early Brethren resisted having

church buildings for a long time. The church is the people, the community of believers, not the events in a building. It is the body of Christ in the world, the vine in our story.

What we have to ask ourselves is what we are called to as branches on that vine? How do we make sure our branches produce juicy fruit instead of dried up raisins?

From our epistle reading, it is clear that love is the core of whatever measurement we have for success. Are we abiding in God as God abides in us? Does God's self sacrificing love flow through us? Do we feel fear and hate or have we allowed God's love to drive that from us? We bear fruit in works of love and following the example of God's self-sacrificing love. We love those who are hard to love, those who make themselves unloveable. Those who are different from us, those who we are told we should fear and hate. Whether we like the idea or not, they too are branches on this vine. They are God's children as well. If we cannot find it in our hearts to allow God's love flow from us, we should expect some pruning from the gardner, the vinegrower.

I pray it is only a pruning, and not being trimmed and cast aside. May we all strive to be the branches that bear abundant fruit. Amen.

Benediction

Go forth today in love

Abiding in God's love

and being God's agents of love

Bearing the fruit of love