

Easter 5B 2018 Sermon

John 15:1-8

Jesus said to his disciples, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he 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."

It seems like every time I read the news or turn on the TV, there's a new diet being promoted that is going to help me lose weight, supercharge my energy, cleanse toxins from my body, or make my skin glow. There's the paleo diet, DASH diet, Zone diet, Ketogenic diet, Flexitarian diet, MIND diet, TLC diet, Volumetrics diet, Weight Watchers diet, China diet, Mediterranean diet... and on and on. Each promises to give my body what it *really* needs; and each has the same foil, the same villain from which it wants to save me: our typical Western diet of fast and processed food.

But while there seems to be little agreement as to *which* is THE right diet, there **is** agreement on this: What we put into our bodies makes a difference! What we put into our bodies makes a difference.

And the same can be said for our spirits. What we feed our spirits makes a difference. C.S. Lewis wrote, "God *made* us: invented us as a man invents an engine. A car is made to run on [gasoline], and it would not run properly on anything else. Now God designed the *human* machine to run on Himself. He Himself is the fuel our spirits were *designed* to burn, or the food our spirits were *designed* to feed on. There is no other... God cannot give us a happiness and peace apart from Himself, because it is not there. There is no such thing."¹

Yet, often we *forget* that our spirits were designed to run on **God**, and we try all *sorts* of alternative fuels instead – alternative "diets" for our spirit. We try to achieve happiness and peace through entertainment, alcohol, or buying things. We sometimes think we are feeding our spirits when we feast on news sources that stir up the adrenaline in our bodies and make us feel self-righteously angry.

We were designed to run on God.

A common question that is asked these days is: “How *connected* are you?” – meaning “How plugged into social media are you? Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest, or Snapchat?” But I would suggest that, rather than “How connected are you?,” perhaps a better question is “How are you connected?” To use the image of today’s Gospel, “How are you connected to the TRUE vine, the source of the fuel our spirits were created to run on?”

Jesus tells us, “I am the true 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.” Apart from the source of our spirit’s authentic *fuel*, you and I cannot bear authentic *fruit*. Just as the branches of a grape vine draw their sustenance from the vine, so our spirits were created to draw *their* sustenance from the true vine which is Christ.

So, how are you connected? Your very being here this morning indicates your desire, your hunger to feed your spirit authentic fuel, to nurture your connection with Christ, the true vine. Some of you also attend our Faith-Seeking Journey class, Adult Forum, Centering Prayer group, Men 4 Him, St. Gabriel’s Guild, or some other faith-feeding activity. Many of you pray daily, read the Bible or a daily devotional or other spiritual book. Many of you nurture the flow of Christ’s spirit *into* and *through* you by your loving work that you perform through some ministry, focused either within the church (Altar Guild, Hospitality Committee, Vestry, etc.) or outside the church (CASA, Laundry Love, Little Free Pantry, etc.) The point is to stay anchored in the True vine, the source of the spiritual fuel we were created to run on.

There are *other*, **competing** fuel-sources out there, other “diets” that claim to supply the nutrients we need. Yesterday at Regional Confirmation, a parent of one of the youth who was getting confirmed was upset because this youth’s music teacher not-so-subtly hinted that if he missed choir rehearsal yesterday in order to attend his own Confirmation, his grade might suffer. A competing diet, with real-world consequences. And there are so many other “diets” out there claiming to have the *right* nutrients our spirit needs.

And even if we **are** connected to the True Vine, we can run into the problem of having secondary branches attached to us which drain nourishment from us, often faster than it is replenished from the True Vine. This is why Jesus talks about the Divine Vinegrower pruning away branches that bear no fruit, and even some branches that **do** bear fruit, in order that the remaining branches might bear *more* fruit.

Every year in March, I take some pruning shears and go out to my rose garden. Over the winter, some of the canes of my rose bushes have died, and I cut them out. Without much foliage on the bushes, it’s also easy to see where suckers have grown up from the roots, or where horizontal branches have proliferated in the center of the rose bushes, potentially causing black spot or mildew later in the season. I cut off most of the suckers, and I cut out the branches in the middle of

the bushes to allow better penetration of light and air. And throughout the summer, I deadhead my roses, cutting off the faded blooms so that the plant doesn't continue to pour energy into unwanted rose hips. I want every ounce of energy the plant has to go into producing beautiful, fragrant blooms – the “fruit” of the rose bush!

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower,” Jesus tells us. “He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

We all know that, in our modern lives, there are countless *distractions* and *attractions* all around us, vying for our attention and a piece of our energies. Most of the worries, fears, and anger we allow to “get to” us are like sucker branches growing out from us, draining away the life coming from the True Vine. Expanding on the vine image, I imagine our egos as being like the luxuriant leaves produced by the branches: necessary, to be sure, but only in a supporting role. For the grapevine's main purpose is producing grapes, not leaves; spirit, not ego.

Episcopal priest and author Barbara Crafton notes that getting rid of those parts of our lives that are *obviously* detrimental is pretty straightforward, though not always easy. The really *hard* part comes in allowing **good** and sometimes **fruitful** branches to be pruned away. Jesus tell us that “Every branch that bears fruit [the Divine Vinegrower] *prunes* to make it bear *more* fruit.” In my rose garden, I sometimes have to prune away perfectly healthy branches – some bearing beautiful roses – which nonetheless are growing in the wrong direction. “Not every good thing points in the direction you want to go,” notes Barbara Crafton, “and you can't go in every direction at once...”²

Sometimes there are simply too **many** branches on the bush or the vine, so that *none* of the branches is getting the amount of nourishment it needs to produce the best fruit possible. Our *lives* can become overly-busy, even with *good* activities. For the sake of producing the *mature* fruit of God's kingdom, some of those “good” activities may have to be pruned away.

And we may prayerfully need to enlist the assistance of the Divine Vinegrower to help us discern *which* good things we should let go of, allowing the Vinegrower to prune them away.

Jesus concludes today's Gospel passage by saying, “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” The Christian life is about bearing fruit and becoming disciples – followers of Jesus.

But what is the fruit of a disciple? A few chapters earlier in this same discourse with his disciples, Jesus **told** them what the fruit of discipleship is: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,” he said, “if you love one

another.”³ The fruit of discipleship, the fruit of those branches that abide in the vine, draw their life-fuel from it, and submit to the pruning of the Divine Vinegrower, that fruit is love for one another.

So, the question with which our Gospel leaves us today is this: Do you and I produce the fruit of love in our lives and in the world? If not, perhaps we have been nourishing ourselves from one of the countless “diets” being promoted by our world, rather than abiding in the True Vine and drawing from that Vine the fuel our spirits were created to run on. Perhaps some of our branches are growing in the wrong directions? Perhaps there are too many secondary branches or suckers draining spirit-life from us? Perhaps we need to work with the Divine Vinegrower to prune from us all that keeps us from producing the fruit of love?

AMEN

1 *Mere Christianity*, p. 50

2 <http://www.geraniumfarm.org/dailyemo.cfm?Emo=473>

3 John 13:35