

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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A Fruitful Church

John 15:1-10

One person tells about a business consultant who decided to landscape his grounds. He hired a woman with a doctoral degree in horticulture who was extremely knowledgeable. Since he was very busy and traveled a lot, the business consultant kept emphasizing to the woman that he needed her to create the garden in a way that would require little or no maintenance on his part. So he insisted on having automatic sprinklers and other labor-saving devices. Finally the woman stopped and said to him, "There's one thing you need to deal with before we go any further. If there's no gardener, there's no garden!"¹

A garden doesn't just happen. And neither does a vineyard. That too requires a gardener, a vine grower. According to today's text from John, that's who God is. Our Lord Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener" (v. 1). This gardener doesn't rely upon automation, including the latest AI technology, to do all the work. No, this gardener is very personally engaged in the process of cultivation. He's very hands on. God doesn't just sit on the back porch, staring at his vineyard from a distance, just hoping that everything goes okay and the vines produce what they're supposed to produce. Instead, God gets in there. He enters the vineyard and starts pruning. He cuts and clears. He snips and shapes. He clips and cleanses. In short, God does what's necessary in order for his vineyard to produce. That's because nothing gives God more joy than to see his vineyard bear fruit.

But just as there has to be a proactive gardener, so there also has to be a vine. "I am the true vine," says Jesus. There's probably Old Testament imagery in the background of Jesus' statement. The vine was often used as a symbol of God's people. For example, in the reading earlier in our service from Isaiah: "In that day—'Sing about a fruitful vineyard: I, the Lord watch over it; I water it continually. I guard it day and night so that no one may harm it....' In days to come Jacob will take root, Israel will bud and blossom and fill all the world with fruit" (5:2-3, 6). In other words, God's people living in justice and righteousness is the fruit that God desires and expects. And this kind of fruitfulness is impossible apart from the love that binds God to his people.

Jesus takes this vineyard imagery and develops it in new directions. Yes, fruitfulness requires a gardener/vine grower as well as a vine. But it also requires branches connected to the vine. All three—gardener, vine, and branches--are essential for the production of fruit. Jesus describes their interrelatedness using the language of "abiding" or "remaining." To abide means to be deeply at home, to dwell in this place/space of God's love revealed in Jesus the Son. "Remain [Abide] in me," says Jesus, "and I will remain [abide] in you" (v. 4). Only by making ourselves at home in Jesus and having him make himself at home in us can we produce the fruit of God's love. Otherwise, we become like branches that dry up and need to be thrown into the fire.

It all starts with a God who shares eternal life with us through Jesus. Jesus draws his life and vitality from God, and becomes the source of life for us. So only by staying in

relationship with Jesus can we experience the spiritual power and vitality that generate the lives of love and righteousness God intends for us. Through worship, the word, prayer, fellowship, sacrifice, and service for God's reign, we practice communion with Christ, and his love takes shape in us, individually and as a congregation. This is what it means to bear fruit, to do works of love, which in turn bring glory to God.

And God the gardener knows that this fruit isn't instantaneous. Cultivating this vineyard called the church takes time. Margaret Feinberg tells about her experience of discovering that vintners have to adopt a long-term approach to their work. She says,

The first year a vintner plants shoots of vines rather than seeds because these yield the strongest vines. At the end of the first growing season, he cuts them back. A second year passes. He cuts them back again. Only after the third year does he see his first viable clusters of grapes. Serious vintners leave those clusters on the vines. For most vintners, it's not until year four that they bring in their first harvest.

Applying these insights to her spiritual life, Feinberg writes,

Sometimes I look at my own life and wonder, *Why am I not more fruitful? And why does pruning have to hurt so much? Why does cultivating a healthy crop take so long?* Yet those questions circle around the here and now. God's perspective is much different. Like a good vineyard owner, he knows how to bring about fruitfulness better than I ever will. And he is patient with me, more patient than I am with myself ... [Also], as we fulfill our callings ... we must recognize that like the vintner's, our fruitfulness will not come overnight. The first harvest of our labors may not come for three or five years.²

As Feinberg's experience indicates, this kind of fruit-bearing is an individual matter. It's about each disciple staying in intimate relationship with Jesus. But it's way more than just a personal matter. Remember that Jesus' words come in the context of his Farewell Discourse here in the Gospel of John. Jesus is speaking very pastorally to his disciples, preparing them for the time when he will have returned to the Father and they must continue their life and mission without his physical presence. He begins with the assurance that he is going to prepare a place for them (14:1-2). He promises them the gift of the Holy Spirit (14:15-17). Then comes his metaphor about the vine and the branches, which helps get them ready for his impending absence by reminding them of how they'll be connected to him and to one another. So at this point in his farewell, Jesus is all about relationship, which means that he'll abide not only in each disciple's life but most of all in the life of the community of believers.

One commentator has rightly pointed out that we need to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. "In a vine," she says, "branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine."³ Here, she suggests, is a reminder that in the life of the church we're more than just free-standing individuals. We're each bound together by our common connection to the one vine. This means that in order to bear the fruit of love and righteousness, we need each other. Our lives are intertwined in a community of mutuality and indwelling. Our fruitfulness is impossible without interdependence.

This is a very countercultural way of thinking and being and living. It goes against our society's relentless emphasis on individual autonomy and personal self-sufficiency. By contrast, we in the life of a local congregation are called to model a kind of fruitfulness based on being joined to Jesus and to each other. We in the church get our lives tangled up with one another, in the best sense of the word. And in this vineyard of intertwined

believers, the love of God, and the life-giving power that raised Jesus from the dead, are producing lives that bring glory to the Father.

This is about more than just being a productive congregation. True, it's important for every church to "get things done" for the sake of Christ. We want to grow our congregation and its capacity for ministry. We want to cultivate our giving and strengthen our church budget. We want to take care of the facilities that we have, and make progress on repairs and renovations, inside and outside. We want to build up our programs and activities that serve us inwardly and engage our community outwardly. We want to be a productive fellowship of believers.

I have a general recollection of an article I read years ago in a ministry magazine. It covered what the writer regarded as three keys or essentials to a healthy pastoral ministry. These broadly fell under the heading of three P's. One key was preaching. In other words, a pastor needs to be faithful in the ministry of the word, delivering a solid sermon on a regular basis. Another key was people. A pastor needs to be able to develop deep, trusting relationships with the individuals in the congregation, especially its leaders. And a third essential, the final P, was productivity. A pastor needs to be able to demonstrate that he or she, in partnership with the congregation, can get things done. So yes, in the life of a church, there's a place for making progress, getting things done, and being productive. From time to time, we need to be able to step back, look at something, and say that project is done, that goal is reached, that item is now complete.

But as we hear in today's text, the life of the community of disciples goes beyond productivity and into the deeper matter of fruitfulness. God the gardener's primary mission is to have his saving love, revealed in Jesus, be made known in the world, most of all in and through the life of his people. That means the fruit of God's love being generated in the lives of believers, whose works of love flow out of union with Christ.

This puts us in a more passive kind of posture. It's not primarily about what we as believers accomplish or produce for God. It's more about what God accomplishes or produces through us. It's about fruitfulness, something that starts in the heart of God and works its way into us, so that our lives yield something, namely love and righteousness, for his praise and glory.

Priest and writer Henri Nouwen once described how his life among people with disabilities and special needs shaped his spirituality. He noted:

Living with ... handicapped people, I realize how success-oriented I am. Living with men and women who cannot compete in the worlds of business, industry, sports, or academics but for whom dressing, walking, speaking, eating, drinking, and playing are the main "accomplishments," is extremely frustrating for me. I may have come to the theoretical insight that being is more important than doing, but when asked to just be with people who can do very little I realize how far I am from the realization of that insight. ... Some of us might be productive and others not, but we are all called to bear fruit: fruitfulness is a true quality of love.⁴

We're the branches, not the vine. We're called by God in Christ to fruitfulness, not just productivity. So our risen Lord says, "Remain in me, and I will remain in you. ... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples" (vv. 4a, 8).

¹ From A. Roger Merrill, *First Things First*. Cited by Bill Norman, *Leadership*, Vol. 16, No. 1.

² Margaret Feinberg, "Napa Valley on Leadership." Q Shorts. www.Qideas.org.

³ Gail R. O'Day, "The Gospel of John," in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Abingdon, 1995) n.p.

⁴ Henri J. M. Nouwen, in Lifesigns. *Christianity Today*, Vol. 35, No. 12.