



October 11, 2015

“Pruned”

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Your three Pleasant Hill pastors attended four funerals this week. The funerals were for family and friends outside of this church and because we were not preaching in them, we probably experienced them a bit differently than if they were here at Pleasant Hill Presbyterian. The funeral for my friend took place in Buckhead rather than Duluth. The church was painted white, the floor covered with marble and red carpet, the lighting was bright, and I didn't know four of the six people who spoke during the service. The organ prelude music was quite formal: Elgar and Bach, and Schubert. Yet in singing Amazing Grace, and in hearing the Romans 8 promise that “nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord,” I found comfort. Though the house of worship may be different, the word of God remains constant. I know Andy and Dave also found comfort in God's promises they heard at the funerals they attended. Scripture is intriguing -- because each time we read it, we hear something new. It speaks to all of us—right now, where we are at this very moment in our lives. God's word is constant, and yet living and breathing. Listen now to Jesus' words from the gospel of John, chapter 15, verses 1-11:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 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. 5 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. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Does this passage of scripture make you anxious? It sounds like God gives us a lot of opportunities to mess up. 1) We need to find the right vine, the TRUE vine. 2) We've got to produce fruit or we'll wither and get thrown into the fire. 3) We've also got to produce enough fruit.

Whew.

Often it takes an event like a funeral for us to take stock of the lives we have lived thus far. We think, “What if this was my funeral? Who would come? What would the speakers say about me? And what fruit am I bearing? What have I done, what have I given to this world?” A funeral pushes us to ask -- are we living with intention or are we just keeping our head above water, trying to survive? I know high school seniors can be treading water just as fast as someone caring for their aging parent. There is anxiety and fear present in any stage of life. When we attend a funeral and are faced with the reality of death, the words in this scripture passage that jump out might be withered and pruned and fire.

What fruit are you bearing?

Fruit in our world is code for productivity. Fruit is what we achieve, measured in dollars and degrees and our position in society. It’s shiny and bright and lovely to taste. In 2015, fruit means the pretty things in life.

But maybe we’re putting a 21st century spin on this scripture. Jesus doesn’t talk about achievement, about shiny and bright things that catch the eye. Jesus speaks about the life giving fruit that can grow out of abiding. “Abide in me,” he invites. If you’ve seen Jeff Bridges in the movie *The Big Lebowski* the word abide, as in “The Dude abides,” conjures up a feeling of calm, of peace. I hear “abide in me” and suddenly go from hurrying and scurrying to produce and move forward and do do do-- to exhaling. Completely. Do it with me—inhale. Now exhale. Abide means relaxing. Letting your guard down. Feeling secure. Swimming in the waters of support and love.

My daughter had spinal surgery a few years ago –here is a picture of a before and after x-ray. As she recovered there was NO position that was pain free for her. Sitting in a chair hurt. Lying in bed hurt. Standing was out of the question. Finally, someone who had been through that same spinal surgery showed up at our door with the very latest in technology . . . a bean bag. Who knew that this 1970s tv-room decorating staple would be the medical miracle Grace needed? Here’s the magic--when you sink into a bean bag it conforms to your body completely. It supports your legs, your bootie, your back, your shoulders and your arms. It envelopes you and holds you steady. That is the mental picture I conjure up when Jesus invites us to abide in Him. We can sink down deep into him and feel every part of ourselves fully supported.

Biblical scholars say that the original gospel of John probably did not include today’s scripture reading. In fact, three chapters, 15, 16, and 17, were likely added later by the same author or an author in the community.<sup>1</sup> Chapter 14 ends with Jesus saying, “Rise, let us be on our way.” Those words flow right into the beginning of Chapter 18: “After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples . . . .” Why would three extra chapters be jammed into the middle of this original text?

Here’s what I think. In Chapter 13 Jesus washes the feet of his disciples and foretells his betrayal. He says, “I am going to prepare a place for you.” Those are scary words to hear. The

Savior in whom the disciples have believed, the triumphant Messiah who will conquer the world, has just told them he will suffer betrayal and death. All of their feelings of security vanished into the fear of abandonment. And that fear of having the rug pulled out from under you felt familiar 60 years later when the gospel of John was written. The Jews who professed faith in Christ had just been thrown out of the synagogue, out of their community. They felt isolated and alone.

They needed *at least* three more chapters of assurance in John. They needed to hear hope in verse 11: “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” (15:11) Since they were pruned, cut off, they needed to hear they were still important to God. Verse 16: “You did not choose me / but I chose you.” They had to know there was a purpose to their lives: “I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.”

Don't those circumstances, the fear and anxiety and isolation, sound so familiar to us? Don't we need hope and purpose and the assurance that we belong to God? As we email and blog from our computers and text from our phones, why do we feel increasingly isolated? When our friendships exist only in cyberspace, are we in need of community? It still feels odd to not at least exchange pleasantries with the person who sits next to me on Marta or the airplane. It feels rude to not make eye contact with the two new people that enter the elevator on the 3rd floor. I'm all for boundaries and stranger danger, but sometimes those new cultural rules—and the fact that everyone is wearing ear buds or is on the phone-- gets in the way of being part of the same human race. You never feel more isolated than when you are alone in a crowd. Verse 17: “I am giving you these commands [to go and bear fruit that will last] so that you may love one another.”

After a funeral several years ago, a man remarked to me that the eulogy had made him especially sad, but not for the reason you would guess. It wasn't because the eulogy made him miss the person so terribly or that the stories that the family shared were depressing. He was sad because he said her family talked only about what the woman had done—rather than whom she was. My friend wondered if her family had really had the chance to know her, what she had to offer as a person, rather than as a producer in the world. Had she enjoyed life and share that joy with others. Had she heard that invitation to abide in Christ? Had she lived in community and shared the good news with others? Or had she worked so hard at producing that she had failed to bear fruit?

In Biblical times, fruit was not the “fitness snack” that it is today. Fruit was essential, life giving. The fertile soil in the Middle East produced fruit trees that fed people. Melon, mango, limes, dates, and grapes are all still integral parts of a Middle Eastern diet. The image of Christ as the vine and you and me as branches growing from that vine makes sense to someone who spends his days walking among vineyards. And what use is a branch if it does not bear fruit? Life giving, life affirming fruit? What's the point if we are existing only for ourselves and not living fully as brothers and sisters in Christ.

Take a few moments and think about what you did Thursday, Friday, and Saturday. Did you make choices, have conversations, and take actions that were grounded in the true vine of Jesus Christ? Do you feel secure enough—are you abiding—so that you can reach out and grow and bear fruit? Did you mentor someone? Care for another? Protect the powerless? Make someone laugh? Did you instill courage? Bestow praise? In these last 72 hours have you thought deeply? Spoken the truth in love? If you didn't, why not? What is stopping you?

Hear this invitation from Jesus: “Abide in me.” He is offering us firm footing, encouragement, vital spiritual nutrition so we can grow and bear fruit. We have to choose to accept it.

We are going to get pruned. Life does that. There isn't a bumper sticker yet that says “pruning happens” . . . but there should be. But remember, it's pruning. A person who tenderly cares for a bonsai tree, snipping it here and there so it grows in the best way, loves that tree. God's commandments can prune us. They are given to us as a gift—not as a threat to justify throwing us into the fire, but as a source of life, to guide us toward bearing fruit.

Last week Dave encouraged us to look at the spiritual disciplines we practice. How are we moving, step by step, toward Christ? We had just talked about that very topic at the women's breakfast the day before his sermon and I suspect that he just listened in and repeated the wisdom he heard us sharing over pancakes.

This week I want you to hear that pruning happens. And you can say “yes!” to the invitation to abide in Christ. This means saying “yes” to many things—to love, to relationship, and to spiritual discipline. It means saying yes, over and over again, to your promise to guide Elijah from the moment of his baptism forward in his walk as a disciple. It means feeling secure enough to give of yourself fully and completely—your time, your talent, and your treasure—and bear fruit.

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> *Harper Collins Study Bible, NRSV*. San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 2006, p 1843.