

5 Easter 2021

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit: apart from me you can do nothing.”

People that know me, realize that I know almost **nothing** about wine. Maybe a wine cooler, but wine no. I know that for many folks it is an intimate social experience. Wine and cheese parties serve.... well, you know...Wine and cheese. Fortunately, I like cheese. So, I have very little expertise concerning what wines are good. My bar is set fairly high at Boone’s farm Strawberry Hill. Who knew that one could make wine out of strawberries? But I have been told that grapes have something to do with it too.

My level of expertise isn’t lacking only in which box of wine to buy, but in how it is grown in the first place. I think knowing some of this process helps when we look at the words of Jesus this morning. This required some research.

A man named Mike Nelson describes his venture into growing grapes.

“When my wife and I moved into a newly purchased home, we found lush grapevines growing on the east side of our screened-in porch. The first year we were there, these vines produced no grapes, but their foliage did provide a good shade from the morning sun. The next year we noticed that the vines were weighing so heavy that they appeared to be in danger of pulling the rain gutters off the eaves, so I decided to see if I could prune them and, in the process, get the vines to produce some fruit as well.

I asked the nurseryman at a local greenhouse how to go about it. I was shocked to learn how drastic my pruning needed to be. When I followed his directions, I found that the remaining growth was only a fraction of what had been there before. It was spring when I did this, so I also found the vines bleeding sap profusely. I wondered if I wasn’t causing

serious injury to these plants, but in rechecking the instructions, I found that I was following them exactly.

Even after such severe pruning, I found that by the end of summer there was nearly as much foliage as before. And the next year we did have some grapes although the east side of the house was too shady to produce any big amount. From this experience I learned firsthand that if one wants to produce grapes, one must prune and do so drastically. Jesus tells us, “(The vinedresser) removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Among vineyard keepers that’s what’s called canopy management”.

So, what is a grape vine and how do we prune it? Jesus says: “I am the vine and you are the branches”. We have heard this many times. If we, as branches, are not connected to Jesus, the vine, we will wither and die. Life flows from the vine through the branches. Seems simple enough until you look at an actual vine. The cordons, or arms, extend out from the trunk of the vine. The trunk is permanent and supports these arms of the vine. Shoots spring up from the cordons and are the new growth of the vine each spring. They start as little buds, then they grow like small green branches. The shoots will bud leaves and will later bear the fruit of the vine, the grape clusters.

Knowing the parts of the grape vine becomes important when Jesus says: “Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch **that does** bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit”.

The act of pruning stimulates growth, produces maximum yield without breaking the branches with too many clusters for them to bear, and protects against disease. More pruning means more grapes. Growers advise not being afraid to remove up to 90% of the prior year’s growth through pruning. That seems excessive but apparently it works.

How might all of this relate to us? I do not believe that any of us have died in our relationships with Jesus to the point of being cut off and thrown into the fire. Not a good outcome but then again, that is not my call. But for that to happen it would mean that either Jesus has turned his back to us, or we have renounced Him. Not a likely scenario for most of us. As Christians, we know that in order to bear fruit we need to be connected to Jesus and Jesus connected to us. We need his life-giving Spirit running through us for fruit to grow. As with the grape vine, pruning is not optional and is often painful.

In an article written by ALEASHA Morris, she discusses a book by Dr. Henry Cloud called *Necessary Endings*. In the book, Dr Cloud talks about three circumstances when life pruning is required. He discusses three cases of 'life' pruning as it relates to a rose bush.

--Pruning is necessary when the Bush Produces More Buds Than It Can Sustain

"He talks about when lives are often filled with so many good things; so many opportunities, commitments, endeavors, and relationships, that we are overwhelmed. Our resources are stretched, and nothing, or no one, is getting our full attention. In most areas we are surviving, not thriving".

-- The second case is when the bush has sick branches that are not Going to Get Well. He says:

"We limp along with broken relationships, hang onto toxic habits, and linger in commitments that deplete us physically or emotionally. It feels as though all of our energy is being diverted to sustain parts of our life that are not meeting our hopes and expectations."

-- The third case is when Dead Branches that Are Taking Up Space.

“If an attentive gardener looks closely, many rosebushes have branches and buds that are already dead and are taking up valuable space for potential growth of the living. These lifeless portions are not always easy to see and can be easy to ignore. They wither and hide behind the beauty of the new. Their mere existence limits expansion and thwarts healthy blooms. It is a gardener’s obligation to remove these parts of the rosebush that are simply taking up space”.

As in our own lives, we are often burdened with situations that have run their course and no longer contribute to our success. Finding and removing what chokes our life can help us to breath deeper, spread wider, and grow higher than we ever thought possible. What would happen if we removed all the things, and relationships in our lives, that can never be revived?

Anything that cuts off the life of the Spirit in our lives needs to be removed and thrown away. Anything that interferes with the life flow of the Spirit through our branches needs to be pruned back. And despite any abundant growth of fruit, as a result of our life in Christ, pruning will still be necessary for even more abundant fruit to grow. We may not see this, but Jesus does.

This is also true in our lives as church. Are there programs in the church that no longer make any sense and are draining us? Do we do things because we have always done them, even when they no longer appear relevant and life-giving? Are we resistant to learning new growing techniques that would serve to increase the harvest? Are we missing the folks in the congregation who are withering for lack of sustenance and attention?

The mantra of the church for the last few decades has been “church growth.”

Specifically, butts in the pews. Notice that Jesus doesn't call the branches to growth, he calls them to produce better fruit. Maybe our mantra ought to be "Where's the fruit." When God takes the pruning shears to your life, or to the church, it is not an issue of whether you are growing, but the quality of the fruit being produced. I believe that we, as church, have undergone a lot of pruning over the past year. This has shaped us to grow in new directions and as a result, the fruit produced has been life-giving!

Everything we do as Christians and as Church must maintain the living connection to Jesus.

"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".

Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruit of the Spirit is "love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control."

Maintaining and nurturing our life with Jesus will produce these fruits. Our reading from 1 John today speaks volumes about one of those fruits.

"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. 8Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love."

Every grower wants their grapes to be the best quality possible. They want their harvest to reach as many people as is conceivable including those who have not yet had the opportunity to enjoy the goodness. The life of the Spirit flows from the vine through the branches and produces these amazing fruits. It may take a lot of pruning to get there. I know that it will for me. But this is the kind of growth that must take place in our lives, as Christians and as the Church. The **alternative** is devastating to both.

Amen