

Soul Food©**John 15:1-8****May 3, 2015****Dr. Sharlyn Gates**

I love springtime, don't you? It's finally looking like spring outside! Fred and I went to Flint yesterday and we both commented on how much spring has suddenly sprung. We say green grass and yellow jonquils in so many places.

Spring always makes me think of two of my favorite men. My husband, Fred, of course. But, also my grandfather, George Wilkinson.

Granddad used to grow beautiful roses. He always had different colors and various types of roses growing in his yard. And there were also small roses growing on vines up a lattice on the porch. You know, those that have lots of little thorns on them so even though you want to pick them, you know you'd better be really careful!

My Grandfather was a very passionate and somewhat emotional man. He could become quite moved by beauty. He would sometimes come into the house with a beautiful rose in his hand and his eyes would be brimming with tears.

Fred is a lot like granddad in being able to grow plants and flowers. He will move them around from place to place, giving them sun or shade, watering them, transplanting them into a different pot, if necessary. He has several plants right now that are beautiful because of his special care and tender coaxing.

In our text from John today, Jesus uses gardener language to make a point about how important it is to stay connected to him.

"I am the vine," he says, "you are the branches, the Father is the gardener."

I really don't know much about raising grape vines, which is what Jesus is using as his metaphor. But, I do know the gardener has to have a lot of knowledge about raising grape vines. He must know the vine really well before pruning the branches.

If the vine should accidently get cut off, then the branches will die. Of course, if the vine were cut – it too would die and there would be nothing left.

I've learned that pruning is a very important part of growing strong, healthy vines that produce grapes – and if they weren't pruned, they would still grow – but they would be wild and unmanageable. They would be weak and unruly.

An interesting thing about grape vines is that the trunk of the vine is much stronger when it has lots of lots of healthy, fruitful branches. The vine draws air, and oxygen, and nourishment, from the branches, and then the vine gives nourishment out even more to those same branches.

Jesus said, “Abide in me, and I abide in you,”

Of course, if a branch gets cut off from the vine – it’s main source – it will wither and die. And then, of course, it won’t produce any fruit. It will be worthless and will need to be cleared away.

Sometimes, there are branches that are not producing any fruit, and yet they are taking away nourishment from the other branches. In that case, those branches have to be cut off so that the others can live and be healthy.

And Jesus said: I am the vine, you are the branches, those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

Eugene Peterson, in the Message translation, changes the word *abide* to *live*. “Live in me, and I will live in you.” Jesus is saying, “Stay connected to me. Cling to me. Let me be your nourishment, your food, your drink, your lifeline.”

God – our Creator – is the one who does the planting; God is the one who oversees and loves and prunes. God knows the Vine – Jesus – completely; God loves the Vine – Jesus, the Son – with a deep, abiding, live in me kind of love, that pours into Jesus and then out to us. God gives air and breathe and water and sunshine and warmth and all the things that are needed to promote healthy growth.

Jesus, the Vine, draws his life and love from God, the Gardener, and then feeds it out to the branches. We are the branches. And, as long as we stay connected to Jesus, we have life and health and growth. Apart from him, we have nothing, and we can bear no fruit.

Jesus says “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” It is fruit bearing that is important, and it is fruit that we bear if we are connected to him, but that we won’t have without him. It is the lack of fruit that is the nothing he is talking about, if we are separated from him.

It is our fruits that reveal how close we are to the vine. When we love Christ and have his love in us, we naturally produce more of that love.

Love is the fruit that Christians should be showing in all we do – in every aspect of the life of a follower. To love, as Jesus loved us, is the command, and it is the fruit he especially wants to see us produce.

If we have the fruit of love, then it is natural for us to bear other fruits as well. What are some of the other fruits we’ve learned about? Paul writes in Galatians 5:22-23 that the fruits the Holy Spirit produces in us are: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

This vine and branch analogy is very community oriented. This is about us as a body – not just us as individuals. Of course, it does take each of us as individuals to do our part in becoming strong through study and worship, participating in the life and mission of the Church.

But we, the Church, exist because of the vine. Jesus is the one who established the Church. Who gave his life for the Church.

But why is the church important? Does it exist for our own enjoyment? For our own comfort? Is it so we have a family of faith to be with and to gain help from? Is it so we can learn and grow ourselves?

Of course it is! But that isn't all. Jesus said, as he was about to ascend into heaven, "Go! Go out to the ends of the earth and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And I will be with you."

Jesus established the church for the mission of growing disciples.

Why is that so important – besides the fact that people can benefit greatly from knowing the love of God?

Remember how that the trunk of the vine – the vine itself – is stronger and healthier when it has lots of healthy, strong branches?

Jesus, the vine, is stronger today because of disciples; because of the Church. Jesus' ministry is more vital, and much stronger when the Church is mighty and healthy and strong and bearing fruit – full of love and joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Jesus said, "You will do greater things than I can do."

When the Church is really being the Church, Jesus' ministry is stronger than ever.

People are loving; they are offering radical hospitality to the stranger; they are passionate about worshipping God; intentional about study and growth; willing to take risks in doing missions – in helping others, and in spreading the good news of Jesus' love and salvation.

We find ourselves not just being generous, but being extravagantly generous in giving our time, talents and treasures for the sake of the gospel.

Does that sound familiar to you? Remember the study we did about the five practices of fruitful congregations? Those are fruits we, the branches, bear when we are connected to the vine – our Lord Jesus.

“If you abide in me,” Jesus said, “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.”

The thing is – if we abide in Christ – if he is our life source – then his words of life live in us. What we would ask for is that we will bear much fruit for him – that we would love as he loves; that we would do as he does, that we would grow his Church so that there will be strong disciples, and so that his ministry will continue to be vital and powerful.

And *that* is what glorifies God, the Gardener!

In a moment we will come to the Lord’s table where we are fed by him, the Vine. It is like taking in plant food. We are the branches that need to be fed so we will be strong and healthy, and able to produce more fruit for him.

We are living branches, alive because of Jesus, the Vine. We are branches with souls that love him and love others because of him. I guess we could call this food he gives our soul food. It is truly food for the nourishment of our souls.

Let us remain connected to the one who feeds us and lives in us, even as we live in him. May we produce beautiful fruit for our Master Gardener, especially the fruit of love.

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