

Growing God's Garden: 3) Bearing Fruit
John 15:1-8; Galatians 5:22-23a
October 16, 2005

Genealogy has become a hobby of many in recent years. There is a longing to know about our ancestors, to have grounding in our family roots, to know from whence we come.

Jesus was also a genealogist. Instead of a family tree, he spoke of the spiritual family vine to which we belong. God is the Vinegrower, the Gardener. Jesus is the Vine. He is the main branch from which all others spring. Jesus is the source of spiritual life for the rest of the plant. Jesus' friends and followers are the branches that sprout off of the main vine. These branches are meant for bearing fruit, fruit of the Holy Spirit, the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Jesus offers us a wonderful horticultural image of the spiritual family vine bearing fruit to enhance the life of all.

Jesus speaks to the importance of the connection between the vine and branches. Branches can't fulfill their purpose of fruit-bearing unless they are attached to the vine. Likewise, Christians cannot bear fruit of the Spirit unless they are connected to Jesus. Jesus is talking about an intimate, life-giving connection, as mothers provide milk for their infants. The strength of the branches is in their connection to the vine. Disciples need a living, organic, dynamic relationship to Jesus to stay alive in the faith.

Consider the onion and the artichoke, two of the most interesting vegetables in God's garden. An onion looks rather harmless, but once we begin peeling its layers, it puts up resistance, seeking to stop our efforts by stinging our eyes and reducing us to tears. If we persist in peeling off layer after layer, what is the reward for our labor? An onion has no heart, no core, no inner character. It has only layers and layers, masks that resist being ripped off.

Artichokes have protective coverings, thistle-like petals that must be peeled off. They hardly look appetizing. The first artichoke I recall seeing was in dining hall at college; I had no clue what to do with this strange looking plant on my plate. Fortunately my friends were Californians who knew how to eat them. That was a bit of my extra-curricular education in college! It seems very silly to pull off leaf by leaf to receive only a small taste of food. But those who are persistent discover the increasing

succulence of the petals the deeper one goes. Eventually they find the heart of an artichoke, a core that has integrity, character and great taste.

Onions and artichokes offer a glimpse in the persona of a Christian. While some people are layers of love and good works surrounding a heart that is genuinely open, receptive, and packed with God's grace, others are only layer upon layer of pretense with no heart within.¹

In speaking of the relationship between the vine and the branches, Jesus is speaking to the condition of our heart. Is our heart hollow, like the onion, of no substance? Or is our heart rich and luscious, marked by integrity and character, specifically the character of Jesus Christ.

A hollow heart is cut off from the vine, detached from God, isolated from Jesus. It will wither and die. We can't sustain ourselves alone for very long and live. If we become contaminated by negative influences, we will produce spoiled fruit, which is a betrayal of who we are called to be.

A heart that is attached to the Vine, that draws its life and sustenance from the True Vine, that is connected to the living, risen Christ, will live, grow, and thrive. It will produce a rich harvest of succulent fruit.

Jesus offers us a generous invitation to attach ourselves as branches to himself as the Vine. He says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." The Jerusalem Bible translates it like this: "Make your home in me, as I make mine in you." How much closer can we get to Jesus than to live with him on an intimate basis—living in Christ's home and Christ living in our hearts? Jesus feeds us with his word, the Word of God, teaching us how to grow fruitful and productive lives. As listen to God's word, internalize it, make it our own, we grow and mature. As we pray, read the Bible, study the faith with fellow disciples, we keep the lifeblood of Jesus flowing through us. We will bear the fruit of the Spirit, in the form of healthy relationships, works of service, integrity and character.

Although our core may be well connected to Christ, he tells us that we still need to undergo pruning in order to produce more fruit. That is true for natural vines as well.

Left to themselves, vines will sprawl out all over the place and produce huge canopies of shoots, leaves, and branches. Unless the canopy is controlled, the vine will not yield much fruit or topshelf grapes.

Cutting back the canopy feels counter-intuitive, because all the greenery suggests that it is a very healthy vine. In reality, it is all show and tell. A vine with a huge canopy may be *looking* good, but it isn't *doing* any good.²

Jesus is afraid that the disciples might face this same problem. He wasn't interested in showy disciples who did great things on the outside, but who had no inner connection to God. Jesus is interested in the fruit produced, not just any fruit, but excellent fruit which bears the quality of its Creator.

The word for "pruning" is the same word for "being made clean." Pruning may be painful, but it is necessary that branches be "cleansed" of weak, unhealthy, or dead wood in order to grow. The pruning of Christians is an inward, continuous spiritual cleansing that enables us to carry on the work of Jesus. In order to grow fruit of the Spirit, we have to be pruned of our indifference, conflict, impatience, greed, envy, and anger.

In the language of faith, cleansing begins with confession, with acknowledging before God our faults and failings, our weaknesses and wrongdoing. In being honest with God, we make unhealthy wood available for pruning. Once cleansed, space is made for the growth of healthy fruit in the form of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

With hearts connected to Jesus and open to the discipline of pruning, the vineyard grows in a healthy manner. It is not just a matter of individual productiveness; the vineyard is the community of faith. As individual branches the disciples need to be healthy; but as a community our life together in the vineyard of God also needs to be healthy, strong, and productive.

The Bible often uses communal images, like the vineyard and the body of Christ with many parts, to speak of the family of God because God created us to be in relationship with one another. "Research shows that people with strong social bonds—those who are married or enjoy close family and church ties—tend to be happier and healthier than those lacking such bonds."³

Perhaps you remember the Coconut Grove fire in Boston in 1942 in which 492 people were killed. Erich Lindemann researched the lives of the survivors. He found that there were two kinds of survivors – those who recovered quickly, and those who recovered slowly or barely. The only difference he could find between the two was that those who recovered quickly found strength and support, not from counseling or therapy, but from a community of friends and family who called on them, kept track of them, wrote them, and loved them back.⁴

Belonging to the community of God in Christ invites us to share all that we are: laughter and tears, joys and pains, celebrations and heartache.

As our lives are entwined with one another, the community grows stronger. The branches find support from one another and from their anchor, the Vine of Jesus. We discover the love we need, the love of God, the love of neighbor, and the opportunity to love one another. We discover that we belong to God's family vineyard.

May this corner of God's vineyard grow more deeply in our connection to Christ. May we ever be mindful of what needs to be pruned to allow more productive growth of the fruit of God's Holy Spirit. May this community offer a sense of belonging to all who come in search of God.

¹ Leonard I. Sweet, *A Cup of Coffee at the Soul Café* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), p. 18.

² “Canopy Management,” *Homiletics*, May 2003, pp. 31-32.

³ R. Stephen Warner, “Burden of choice,” *Christian Century*, July 13, 2004, p. 20.

⁴ Erich and Elizabeth Lindemann, *Beyond Grief: Studies in Crisis Intervention* (Northvale, NJ: Arronson, 1979), quoted on Homiletics Online, retrieved October 15, 2005.

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