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Church of the Transfiguration, Manhattan, NY

Text: John 15:1-8

Theme: What does it mean to bear God's fruit?

Subject: Being branches of the vine of Jesus

Title: Fruit of the Vine

As some of you know, I grew up in central Texas. I consider that fact a great blessing in my life—Texas is a wonderful, strange place. In the early 1990s Queen Elizabeth II came to our state to visit our newly elected Governor, Ann Richards. I was there for her arrival at the state capitol when she declared that “lesser mortals are pitied for their misfortune in not being born Texan.” That’s about right, I think. She certainly knew her crowd.

As a child I lived in Austin, but many weekends found me in the small town of Elgin thirty miles east of the city. Our family owned an old farmstead there that my preacher father dubbed “The Land of Goshen.” This plot of land had an old farmhouse with no running water and assorted outbuildings (including a working outhouse), and lots of fields. Eventually my grandparents built a house there and retired. It was a place for Marguerite and Cecil Smith, who had grown up on the farm, to return to their agrarian roots—World War II had drawn them to factory work in the city, but with retirement they could again till the soil, raise a few cattle, and have the satisfaction of looking out over their own land.

Goshen was a great playground for us kids. My siblings, my cousins, and I would run around all day, under the watchful eye of my grandmother. She ruled the roost, lovingly keeping us in line. I think she always paid attention to what we were doing, and tried to keep us out of trouble and out of harm’s way. She could be stern, but looking back I realize that on the occasions when she spoke harshly, it was truly for our own good. We were not really aware of the dangers that lurked out in the fields—snakes, fire ants, wasps, and who knows what else—and she wanted to be sure that we stayed safe.

One of the places we loved to play was in the woods that were around “the tank” – that’s Texas-talk for a man-made pond. These untamed woods hadn’t been cleared and tilled because they provided the cattle shade from the relentless summer sun. The scrubby live oak and mesquite trees that made up the woods were overrun with wild grape vines—we called them mustang grapevines. These were vines that were mostly thick and woody—left to grow wild, they had put their energy not into fruit, but instead into these long, thick vines ranging from tree to tree. We would swing on the hanging vines like Tarzan, or find a thick vine suspended between two trees that could be sat upon like a swing. While my grandmother often picked the fruit from the younger, more tender vines to make grape jelly or green grape pie, we loved these old woody grapevines simply because they provided so much entertainment.

Vines and vineyards were even more familiar to people in Jesus’ time, so it is not surprising that Jesus uses the vine as a teaching device. Not only were there a lot of

vineyards in Israel, but Israel itself was often referred to in Hebrew scriptures as the vineyard—in the fifth chapter of Isaiah we read that the “vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel.”

In this passage, which is part of Jesus’ long discourse at the close of the Last Supper, Jesus says, “I am the true vine.” This is the last of six or seven “I AM” statements in John, depending on how you count. Each one gives us a slightly different idea about who Jesus is. Before this we have heard Jesus say, “I am the bread of life,” “I am the light of the world,” “I am the gate,” “I am the good shepherd,” “I am the resurrection and the life.” Now, in the final “I AM” statement, he likens himself to a vine.

What might Jesus mean, saying he is the vine, and calling the disciples—and us—branches? The vine is the source of life and nourishment for the branches. A branch that is broken off of the vine quickly withers and dies. This passage makes it clear that it is the relationship between vine and branch that is central: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” Jesus is saying that we are sustained for a fruitful life through our connection to him.

What are the things to which we are most connected today—what sustains us? For some of you perhaps it is your work; certainly we all hope to have a vocation in which we not only make a difference, but through which we are nourished and energized. Or perhaps you find sustenance in your passions: I worked in the opera business for many years, and I encountered many people for whom opera provided the fuel they needed to get through life. These persons were most alive when the lights went down and the orchestra began to play. They found meaning for all of life in the sheer beauty of that art form.

For still others of you, I am sure nourishment is found in your family. The joy of raising children, and of the lasting relationships that God gives us in our spouses is almost miraculous, isn’t it? We are communal creatures, meant to find sustenance in relationship. Whether our families are conventional ones or not, the relationships we have with others provide the place for us to thrive and be fruitful.

But this gospel passage reminds us that we also find nourishment in our relationship to Christ, by abiding in Christ. “Abiding,” as it is used in this passage, means to live or dwell in. We are being invited to find our sustenance IN Christ. But I find a more modern definition of the word “abide” interesting too. The dictionary I consulted spoke of “accepting or acting in accordance with” something, as in abiding by a decision. We find sustenance in a life lived up to the standards that Christ set: to love God with all our heart and soul and strength and mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. [Luke 1:-27]

Our pathway to Christ’s nourishment is through the Word. Of course the Word is key to this writer’s view of Christ—remember the Gospel’s opening passages: “In the beginning was the Word...” In the translation of this passage that we heard this morning the word is spoken of as “cleansing”: “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.” Interestingly, the Greek root of the word translated “cleansed” is the same as the one translated in the previous verse as “pruning.”

That brings us to a stickier part of this allegory: God the father as the vinegrower, pruning us all. My first reaction to this idea is negative. My mind quickly builds an image of a harsh, punishing God. But then I realize that to buy into that conception of God is to

misread this particular passage. If we are the branches, our job is to bear fruit. Pruning a vine is done to promote the growth of fruit. If a vine is left to its own devices, it will put all its energy into vines and leaves, just like those vines on the farm of my childhood. As one commentator said, “it is necessary for the vine-dresser to curb the branches’ enthusiasm: the branches are pruned back almost to the grapes so that the energy is channeled into fruitfulness and not into foliage! At the same time, any branches not bearing fruit are removed - again so that the plant’s energy is directed to its fruit.”¹

I am not a gardener, but I imagine that it must be difficult to cut into a plant that you have so lovingly tended. The gardener does so because she knows that this pruning will ultimately help the plant redirect its energy to that activity which will bear the most fruit. It is an act of love to correct the plant in this way—and, if done properly, it yields glorious fruit.

There is an even more troubling part of this passage, where Jesus speaks of those branches that do not abide in him. “Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned,” we read. It seems hard to reconcile these harsh actions with those of the loving God tending us to grow.

To understand the intent of this passage, we must remember the context of the writer and his community. As Father Fleenor told us last week the gospel writer’s community was one that found itself put out of the synagogue because of their belief in Jesus. In their persecution they needed lots of reassurance that they were on the right path. Here, as in many other passages in the gospel of John, the writer wants to comfort his audience that they have made the right choice. Those “thrown in the fire” are not the focus; rather, we who might question our belief need to know that our choice to follow Jesus is the right one.

What form does this pruning take? I’m not sure. I would like to be able to explain this to you in a clear, concise way, but I think this is part of the mystery of our relationship to God. What I do know is that God the Father, just like my grandmother in my childhood, loves us and wants the best for us. And by faith and example we know that God lovingly tends us. God’s pruning, or cleansing, in whatever form it might take, will bring us into right relationship with God, so that we might do what God so longs for us to do: to bear succulent, beautiful fruit.

Theologian Walter Wink says, “I once heard the bit about ‘bearing more fruit’ as a demand that I get cracking and strain hard to bear much fruit if I wanted Christ to abide with me.”² It is easy for us to think that we must work at being fruitful. Wink reminds, us however, that the extraordinary gift of God’s grace means that we don’t have to worry about what we produce. And that’s a good message for us today in this place, in this busy city where we are constantly measuring ourselves against others, trying to prove our worth. Our job is only to be branches, trusting that the vinegrower will worry about our fruit production. God will lovingly prune us—or cleanse us, depending on how you translate it—so that we might become all that God desires us to be.

¹ http://www.wellsprings.org.uk/easter_2006/easter_05.htm

² Walter Wink, “Abiding, even under the knife - John 15:1-8,” *Christian Century*, April 20, 1994, found at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n13_v111/ai_15177815

We are invited through this passage to be shaped by God the Creator—shaped to be the hands and hearts of Jesus for a world in need. As you come to this altar in the Eucharist, to be fed, think also of the loving ways that God might prune you. Dare to offer yourself up for the cleansing of God in order to become more fruitful.

I end with a prayer in the form of a poem by Sister Christine Schenk, titled “Mighty Maid”:

Springtime and
my true Vine
begins to sprout
with
tiny shoots
peeking forth
from deadwood darkness.

Spring cleaning time
for my cluttered dwelling place
too much filled
with barren branches
and
broken promises of prayer time,
contemplation
cast aside
in favor of
junk food.

Yet wholesome fruit
and
vegetables in plenty

I would bear
for my own fulfilling
and the nourishment of
my people.

But first,
I must be cleansed ...

What is it
dear Mighty Maid God
that needs to go
so I can grow?³

³ Christine Schenk, Sr., “Mighty Maid,” National Catholic Reporter, May 28, 1999, found at http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1141/is_30_35/ai_5483072