

Date: April 29, 2018

Scripture: John 15:1-8

Title: BEARING FRUIT

Writer Henry Mitchell visited a region here in California, that's home to some of the world's finest vineyards. His eye was caught by rows of vines that had just been pruned. It was depressing. All that was left of the once beautiful grapevines were rows of ugly looking stumps and a few "runners" stretching from each of those stumps. Mitchell remarked to his guide, "It looks disastrous." The guide replied, "Don't worry, we do that for three years to every vine, we cut it back before it's allowed to yield any fruit. For these vines, this was the third year. Just wait a few months, and you will see grapes nearly as big as ping pong balls!" There's a lesson for us here, no pruning, no cutting back, no luscious looking fruit.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful . . ." Those are powerful words!

These words are directed to both churches and to individual church members. Christ is the true vine. We are the branches. **And we have but one job. That's to bear fruit.** That's why we have been called together as a community. We're not here simply to enjoy one another's company. We're here, to be nourished so that we may bear fruit in our homes, in our community, and in the world for which Christ died. So the question for today is . . . where is your fruit? Is our church a better church because you're here? Is your home a better home, because you're here? Is the world a better place, because you're here? Where is your fruit?

Some of us have grown "too comfortable in Zion." We could be doing so much more for the sake of the Kingdom, but we have forgotten that our main task is to make a difference in the world. Our main task is to make Christ known in this community. Our main task is to help people know that they are loved. Our main task, is to bear fruit. Jesus put it as pointedly as possible. The tree that doesn't bear fruit, will be thrown into the fire. That's vivid imagery and a little bit scary. The tree that doesn't bear fruit, will be thrown into a fire. But what good is a grape vine without grapes? What use is a fig tree without figs? Tear them down, strip their branches, throw them into the flames. Nothing could be clearer than this principle: we are to bear fruit. That's our job. Now how do we go about doing that?

First, we produce fruit by staying connected to the vine. Later in this passage Christ says, "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit, unless you remain in me. 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 . . .” Again, the message is clear. The secret to bearing fruit, is staying connected to Christ.

Recently I read a devotion from a woman in a tropical area of our country, who had a guava tree in her yard that bore some large juicy fruit. Twice a year, in April and July, she would look forward to enjoying the fruit of her guava tree. But, for some reason, one year when April came there was no crop. She was very disappointed. She did everything she would normally do, to make sure the tree got all it needed to bear fruit. The roots were deep, there was sunlight and, the tree got the water it needed. Then July came around and the same thing happened as in April, no fruit! She couldn’t understand why this was happening. Her impatient husband said to her, “Babe let’s cut this tree down and plant a mango tree, because it’s only taking up space.”

She knew he was right. There was no room in their small yard for a plant that was useless. They didn’t plant it, just to look at it, they wanted to enjoy eating it’s fruit. She was very disappointed and wanted to give the tree some more time. But the husband was unwilling to wait another year to see if fruit would come. Finally, she agreed to cut it down. Upon cutting down the tree, she discovered why the tree wasn’t bearing fruit: a few surface roots had somehow been damaged. Therefore, the tree wasn’t getting the right amount of nutrients from the soil. She felt bad about the decision they made. Had they seen what the problem was, they could have remedied it, and enjoy her bi-annual crop of guava again.

Reflecting on this experience, this woman realized that her experience with the guava tree paralleled her walk with God. If she allowed damage to take place to a few surface roots in her connection to God, then she wouldn’t receive the nutrients she needed to keep God fresh and alive in her heart. Then she wouldn’t be able to produce the fruits of the spirit which Paul lists in Galatians 5:22-23: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. That’s an important rule: If we’re to bear fruit, we must stay connected to the vine, which is Christ. He’s the only source of our life. I hope that’s the primary reason you’re here in worship today. You desire to stay connected to Christ, bearing much fruit.

But there’s a word of warning in this passage. Actually, there are two warnings. Listen again to Christ’s words: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful . . .” What does that mean? Deep in our heart, we know what it means. **There are some people in every group who just aren’t interested in bearing fruit.**

People who work around fruit trees or grapevines, are familiar with the term “sucker shoots.” Sucker shoots are branches that have no fruit but literally suck up the nutrients other branches need. Sucker shoots never bear fruit, but they greatly reduce the quantity and quality of fruit the other branches can bear. Every group has them,

including the church. They're not really interested in bearing fruit. They're only interested in making themselves look good.

Even worse, there are a few people, who are actually poisonous to the group. There are poisonous personalities in every group, including the church. These people, not only don't bear fruit, they actually do enormous harm to the work of the kingdom. They love to sow dissension. They delight in passing along rumors and innuendos. They think they're harmless, but they're actually enemies of God. Use some discernment, when you are around them. Make certain that you don't allow them, to infect you. Be loving toward them, pray for them, treat them the way you would like to be treated. But understand, that they're misguided in their mischief. God knows their heart. God knows the kind of fruit each of us is bearing, or whether we're bearing any fruit at all. Note Christ's words again, at the first of this passage: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. . ."

Now, I'm not sure what being cut off means, but it sounds scary to me. Does it mean they're cut off from God's love? I can't believe that. Does it mean that they're shut off from God's resources? That would be bad enough. What happens to a cut-off person, if they lose a child, or a spouse, or even a job? What happens when they get a bad biopsy report from the doctor, when they reach out for God, will He still be there? We've turned God into a Santa Claus figure, that the words "cut off" are probably not in most Christians' vocabulary. And yet, they're here in Christ's teachings. Sucker shoots had better beware. This is God you're dealing with. Where is your fruit?

But there's a second group Christ mentions, besides those who don't bear fruit. He says, that God cuts off every branch . . . that bears no fruit . . . then he adds that "every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes, so that it will be even more fruitful . . ."

I believe he's talking about us, and he seems to be saying, that even if we do bear fruit, life isn't going to be a picnic. Pruning can be painful. When the owner of the vineyard prunes a vine, not only does he cut away all the dead wood. He also cuts away some of the live wood. This is a tough teaching. But here's what Jesus may be saying to us. "Sometimes life hurts. My followers are not immune to tragedy. In fact, some of my most prized saints have experienced tragedy because they ARE my followers. Now when tragedy comes, as it does in every life, there's little profit in asking God, 'Why did this happen to me?' That's one question God never seems to answer. Here's the question you should ask when tragedy strikes, 'Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?'" I guarantee, that's one question, that will always receive a positive answer.

Maybe this is the difference between those who are "cut off" and those who are "pruned." It never occurs to those who are cut off, to ask that question. They aren't interested in bearing fruit. So tragedy is meaningless. They may even view it as punishment from God. All that's left for them, is to lash out at God in anger. But the

person who is able to pray in the face of great tragedy, “Lord, is there some way you can use this event to prune me and cause me to bear more fruit to your glory?” will find a source of strength they never dreamed possible.

In one of Bishop William Willimon’s recent books he tells a sensitive and beautiful story about a young couple who understood the meaning of God’s pruning in a way that would humble all of us. Willimon arrived at a hospital room, where a woman in his church had just given birth. He was told that “there were problems with the birth.”

The couple sat in the hospital room waiting. The doctor appeared shortly and said to the new parents, “You have a new baby boy. But there are some problems. Your child has been born with Down syndrome. Your baby also has a rather minor and correctable respiratory condition. My recommendation is for you to consider just letting nature take its course, and then in a few days there shouldn’t be a problem.” The couple seemed confused by what the doctor told them. “If the condition can be corrected, then we want it corrected,” said the husband. His wife immediately nodded in agreement. The doctor said, “You must understand, studies show that parents who keep these children have a high incidence of marital distress and separation. Is it fair for you to bring this sort of suffering upon your other two children?”

Willimon writes at the mention of the word “suffering,” it was as if the doctor finally began speaking the woman’s language. She said, “Our children have had every advantage in the world. They have never really known suffering, never had the opportunity to know it. I don’t know if God’s hand is in this or not, but I could certainly see why it would make sense for a child like this to be born into a family like ours. Our children will do just fine. When you think about it, this is really a great opportunity.”

The doctor looked confused. He abruptly departed, with Will Willimon following him out into the hall. The doctor said, “Reverend, I hope that you can talk some reason into them.” Willimon thought: “The couple was already using reason, but it was reasoning that was foreign to the doctor.” It’s reasoning that is foreign to all of those who are among the “cut-off.” God can use any difficult event that occurs in our lives, to help us become the kind of people God calls us to be.

So, friends, there’s another question besides, where is your fruit? That question is, are you being pruned? It’s only after we have been pruned, that we can bear the most splendid fruit of all. This is what the writer of the book of James means when he writes, “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces perseverance. Let perseverance finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything . . .” Can you do that? If you can, God will use you in wondrous ways. Trust, Believe, and have an Active Faith in God making disciples of Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.