

This morning I invite you
to take a trip in your imagination to Oregon’s wine country...

To Ribbon Ridge and the Dundee Hills,
to the Chehalem Mountains and Yamhill-Carlton
where the luscious cool-climate grapes are grown.

To help you get into it a bit,
I’ll add some gear – a straw hat, for those sunny days later on
a hoe for weeding
and these clippers for pruning the branches.

Got the picture?

Now let’s listen to the way Jesus describes the wine grower’s work in John 15,
the Gospel reading for the past two Sundays... I’ll use the old RSV translation:

**I am the true Vine
and my Father is the vinedresser.
Every branch of mine that bears no fruit he takes away
and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit.**

**Abide in me, and I in you.
If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will,
and it shall be done for you.
By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit...
This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.**

**You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you
that you should go and bear fruit – and that your fruit should abide.**

Can you see GOD THE FATHER?

He’s that WINE GROWER, wearing overalls and a hat.
He’s down on his knees planting.
He’s sweating as He prunes and weeds and cultivates,
investing Himself in His hoped-for harvest.

Can you see JESUS CHRIST?

He's that strong, thick VINE, rooted deep in the dirt,
the special focus of the grower's hard work
on which all his plans depend.

Ah, now look closer! Can you see YOURSELF?
For YOU are in this picture, and so am I.

We are the BRANCHES.

Some longer and stronger, some short and very new.
Of different sizes, and with different-colored leaves, but all coming from
the same place – all sprouting from that one strong VINE.

The Grower has invested a lot of his wealth and his energy into shaping
this VINE, these BRANCHES...

WHY?

Well, because He wants FRUIT!

“Much fruit,” says Jesus, and always “more fruit!”

For if there is no FRUIT, then the Grower has wasted his time.

A BRANCH, you see, is not really good for anything else.

It cannot serve as LUMBER.

One cannot make poles, or pegs, or shingles with it.

It isn't pretty enough to serve as an ornamental.

So if there are no grapes, the grower must simply cut it off and burn it.
(take off hat and lay aside)

There is a WARNING in this picture.

At last count, there were 636 “branches” here at the Trinity Vineyard.

(come down and walk among them)

God is looking carefully at each one of you, even now,
searching for fruit.

How about YOU, Mr. or Mrs. Branch? How about you, young branch?
WHAT ARE YOU PRODUCING?

Some, very frankly, are producing NOTHING AT ALL!

No loving service. No witness. No worship. Not even any promises...

Nothing that would make anyone suspect that this person is a Christian at all.

Others seem to be mostly LEAVES!

There's a lot of busyness. Lots of activity.

Often in church, and offerings in the plate. Appearances at meetings, classes.
But very little that God would call "FRUIT"...

You remember, don't you? The "fruit of the Spirit" for which he looks so eagerly, listed in Galatians 5:

"Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,
gentleness, self-control"

A list like that should make us all PAUSE.

Do we realize that most of the things we do here at church
are not FRUITS in themselves,

but only the means by which the grower would fertilize and nourish the
branches to help in FRUIT PRODUCTION?

Sunshine and water, weeding and pruning and fertilizer
are just the MEANS toward the end, which is FRUIT!

Bible study and meetings, worship and prayer, and
even the Lord's Supper itself are just the MEANS toward the end,
which is FRUIT!

**This is my command, He said, that you Love one another
as I have loved you..**

The goal is FRUIT, I repeat.

Not just "some" fruit. The grower wants MUCH fruit!

We need to hear that, especially if we are living a sort of "minimal Christianity."

A minimal Christian is one who is always thinking,
"What's the LEAST I can do?"

Wives, how would you like a husband who was always saying,
"What's the LEAST I can do for my wife?"

Coach, how would you like a player whose approach is,
"What's the LEAST I can do and still stay on this team?"

To someone who says that, we're inclined to reply,

"Husband, do you really LOVE your wife? Athlete, do you love this sport?"

And I must ask you, “Christian, do you really LOVE your Lord?”

Ah, love for the Lord!

Isn't that the whole secret of fruit production?

Not the shape of the Branch, nor its color, but its connection with the Vine.

7 times in 8 verses Jesus uses a special word to describe that connection.

“ABIDE!” He says. “Abide in me!”

In other words, STAY CONNECTED!

You were connected, weren't you?

On the day of your baptism, the Grower grafted you onto His Vine, Jesus.

The connection was made.

And NOW WHAT? Stay connected!

In my years of ministry, I have had 7 vicars.

Each time at the start of the vicarage year, I would talk about the assignments for that year. I told each vicar there were two assignments more important than any other. Can you guess what they were?

Write sermons? NO. Make calls? NO. Go to meetings? NO.

I told each one to STAY CONNECTED with Jesus in his daily devotional life, and to stay connected with his wife and family at home.

Do you want to be a FRUITFUL CHRISTIAN?

Then His word to you is not, “Struggle and sweat!”

not “run madly from place to place”

not “work, work, work”

but very simply, “ABIDE...STAY CONNECTED...KEEP CLOSE TO ME”

How does one do that?

Verse 7 explains: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask what you will, and it shall be done for you.”

The connection is maintained in the hearing of the Word of Jesus.

That's the reason for all those churchly activities mentioned earlier:
the worship, the Bible Study, the Lord's Supper.

All of them bring us that Word of the Gospel that keeps us CONNECTED
with Him.

But be careful!

Jesus does not say, "Abide in CHURCH" but rather, "Abide IN ME"

For we run the risk of thinking that what God is after is simply that we
put in a weekly appearance at church.

But in fact, He is after something greater –
a CONTINUOUS, DAILY CONNECTION in thought, in faith, and in prayer!

If your life is less fruitful than it should be, then a good question to ask is,
"How is my connection with Jesus?"

A certain homeowner, frustrated that he could not make his refrigerator work,
called in a repairman.

It took only two minutes to solve.

"Your cord wasn't plugged in all the way," he told the homeowner,
who was both relieved...and embarrassed.

Are you PLUGGED IN?

Or has your connection with Jesus grown loose over the years?

Is your connection being strengthened, or weakened by what you read?
by what you watch?
by the friends you keep?

ABIDE IN ME, He told us.

In ME.

When reading the Bible, do we listen for his voice?

Are our prayers simply the rattling through of something memorized long ago,
or a time of honest, quiet sharing and listening with the Savior?

Have you asked Him to produce that missing fruit – asked for patience?
for peace? for self-control?

Ah, you may say, I ASK for such things, but look what God sends me instead...

heartaches, problems, and accidents,
trials and suffering!

No wonder I can't be fruitful. I'm in PAIN!
Stressed out. Tied down. Anxious and angry.
Look what's happening to me!

Indeed, look again.

It may be the Gardener Himself at work on you.

**Every branch of mine that does bear fruit he prunes,
that it may bear more fruit.**

PRUNING.

Every fruit-grower knows about that.

I remember the first time I saw my father prune our apple trees in Indiana.
Not just a few snips here and there did he make.
NO, he lopped off large branches that looked good and healthy to me.

“You're ruining it!” was what I thought, and I told him so.

Don't we react that way when God “prunes” us?

“You're ruining me! I need that, God. Don't cut it away!”

How often I have been asked by someone to explain the WHY of some truly difficult time.

Why did we lose this baby? This job?
Why has my health failed?
Why this senseless accident?

The purpose and plan of God may not become apparent
until much later when some beautiful fruit grows out of that wounded heart.

In the San Joachin Valley in California are some of the world's finest vineyards.
Writer Henry Mitchell reports making a visit there, and seeing in a newer
portion of that vineyard
long rows of vines just after pruning.

At the end of each row were huge piles of lovely green branches...
what was left were rows of ugly-looking stumps
and a few “runners” stretching from each of those.

“It looks disastrous,” Mitchell remarked to his guide.

“Don’t worry, the guide replied. “We do that for three years to every vine
before it’s allowed to set on 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!”

Can you understand why Jesus chose such a picture?

How better to illustrate the mysterious working of God in our lives?

The Vine and the Branches...

A picture that rejoices our hearts
when it reminds us that we are HIS, grafted in by our BAPTISM,
connected to Jesus.

A picture that humbles us
by showing that a fruitful life is not the product of our hard work
but His power flowing into us

A picture that instructs us
that the chief business of the Christian life is
staying CONNECTED to Him

A picture that encourages us
to look past the pain of our pruning
and see the lovely fruits that are to come.

STAY CONNECTED, FRIEND!

The Grower has his eye on you. The vine will nourish you. You will bear fruit!

“By this the Father is glorified...”