

Sermon Text: John 15:1-8

Now this is an old story, but a good one. A man's mother was visiting him on Mother's Day Sunday, and that's happening around here. I can tell. Her son absolutely refused to get up to get ready for church. His mom knocked on his door several times, got no response, and finally she went into his room, and said, "Son, you have to get up, or you'll be late." He said, "I am tired. I don't want to go to church, and besides no one there likes me! Give me three good reasons why I should go." His mother said, "Well, first of all, God wants you in church. Secondly, you're 30 years old, and you should know that worship is important. Thirdly, you are the pastor!"

Now, whether or not you're the pastor, it is not an easy thing to be a disciple of Jesus Christ, and disconnected and alone, it is impossible. Jesus used gardening analogies quite a bit so maybe you'll let me get by with this one. It's got some puns in it, but I like it, and it's also meaningful. A clever preacher, I consider him clever, once compared the life of faith to a garden. He said in his garden he would first plant three rows of squash. Squash gossip. Squash criticism, and squash indifference. Then he would plant three rows of lettuce. Let us be faithful. Let us be unselfish. Let us love one another. Finally, he would add turnips. Turn up for church. Turn up with a smile, and turn up to serve others. I like it.

Now, a true story, true but almost unbelievable, Donald Gray Barnhouse writes about a grapevine that can be found in Hampton Court near London, England that is, they guess, a thousand years old. Some of its branches are 200 feet long, and its single root is at least 2 feet thick. Because of decades and centuries of skillful cutting and pruning, that one vine produces several tons of grapes every year. Even though some of the smaller branches are 200 feet away from the main stem, they bear plenty of fruit because they are joined to the vine.

The great truth that Jesus is trying to tell us in this story is that, if we want life in all of its fullness, then we must be connected to the true vine, to the source of life and true life and eternal life that is Jesus the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Now, most of Scripture can be told in terms of a two-sided coin. You will start, as you really study it, to see this. You've got the heads and tails of most every point. Let your mind go, and you can fill in all the stories and all the teachings that fit these categories. You have the found and the lost, living in God's light and then hiding in darkness. You have the self-righteousness on one side and humble confession on the other. You have running from God on one side and turning to embrace God on the other. You have trusting God on one side and trusting worldly wealth and power on the other. You have the broken on one side and wholeness, healing on the other, and finally, the connected on one side and the disconnected and alone on the other. Connected and disconnected is what this little teaching moment Jesus tells us is about.

You know the sin of the Pharisees and of many modern Christians is to confuse the church with some sort of business, to see the church as some sort of social club, which happens to sing songs about God. That is not Jesus' teaching. Jesus teaches that the church is something organic, something living, something growing and changing and producing fruit that feeds God's good things to the world. Jesus' teaching is that the church does not really exist for us. It is instead a growing, living thing with roots in Heaven, and fruits of love and Christ-like compassion

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 14, 2006

produced out there in the world for all to see, to see and to know that in spite of the darkness and decay and violence and selfish sin, in spite of Hell itself, God is doing something in the world. It is through the church that God is doing something, that God is growing and living this thing that we call the church in the world, and the world comes to know and to believe that God is working through such as us, as we live connected and empowered by God’s spirit.

We, if we are the church, are those with roots in God’s Kingdom who live out the being found instead of lost, who live out God’s light instead of darkness, who live out humble confession instead of self-righteousness, who live out turning to embrace God instead of running away, who live out trust in God instead of wealth and power, and we live out true life as God intended instead of lies and death. We live out connected to God and connected to each other instead of disconnected and alone and pretending that no one else matters.

There are people in the world who think they are better than others by virtue of station or standing or wealth or education. Jesus teaches not so in the church. He says, “Connected to me, you will know that all branches are equally valued. All branches find their sustenance through one source, Jesus the Christ, the true vine. All the branches have one purpose and one purpose only – to bear good fruit and to witness the God’s activity in the world.” Christ clearly states the implications of this story. He is the vine. We are the branches. We are totally dependent upon Him. Without abiding and connecting to God in Christ, we can do nothing that is good. We can do a reasonable facsimile, but not truly good from the heart, mind, soul, and out. All the branches together make up the vine. It isn’t a private faith acted out in a private way, disconnected at all. All of us together are the church and God’s activity in the world happens through the church. It isn’t about which branch is greater or better or more gifted. It is about how much good fruit can be produced by all the branches together. As we give ourselves to God as branches of the true vine, the true vine, Jesus, we are connected to one another as well.

That means we can and we should hold each other accountable because ultimately we are connected and intertwined. When one is hurt, we all share the hurt. When one bears good fruit, we all share the joy. At least, that is the church that Jesus described. We the church are more an organism than an institution, garnering our life from God, garnering our good from God, our gifts from God. We are living things proving that God is alive and in the world. They outside may see our faith and love and forgiveness and humility, and be drawn to God. Evangelism is a living faith, and the light and the love and the humility that is in us in such a Christ-like way that other people notice and they seek the source of our power. That source is always rooted in God, not in us.

When someone is haughty or selfish or self-important, that trait needs pruning. You notice Jesus said there needs to be some pruning at times, even if you produce good fruits, you might need pruning. It hurts our witness to the world when we act contrary to the love of Christ. It harms this organic, living structure, which is the church. It diseases and disables our ability to reveal the living God others who might be wandering in darkness and looking for God in the world. We, each branch, must be on guard against whatever keeps the whole church from growing. It might be us. It might be the mistake we make when we think the church is just another club. It might be the withered unfruitful habits and hurtful things we do which witness the wrong side of

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 14, 2006

the coin. We may need pruning. As an identified branch of this vine called God’s church, we may show more lost in the world than found. We may show more hiding in the darkness than living in God’s light. We may show more self-righteousness than humble confession. We may show more running away than turning to embrace, and we may show more trusting in wealth and power than trusting in God. By doing all of that, we show a disconnection. We show that we are not connected to the true vine.

The shortsighted folk theology of our time mistakenly makes faith a personal, private thing. When did Jesus teach that? When did Jesus say your sins are private, your salvation private, your faith should be kept secret and is no one else’s business? When did Jesus say you get God’s love and light, and then hide it securely under your bed so that no one will suspect? When did Jesus say keep the traditions at all cost of your congregation and of your denomination because your church is important all by itself? Ignore the others who claim Christ. When did you ever hear Jesus teach like that?

Instead, I hear everywhere Jesus making our mission worldwide. He died not for our sins only, but also for the sins of the whole world. We are called to be engrafted into God’s growing, organic, living thing called the church, and to look around and see these other branches engrafted, and all traced back to the single source, the single root which is God in Christ. It’s a root that was planted as a cross in the ground and God’s son planted in a tomb in a cave, and then out of that true life, new life growing from there and through the Holy Spirit spreading, connecting one and then another directly to God and to each other.

I am glad that it is God who does the pruning as Jesus tells the story here. It’s not our neighbors or our spouses or our friends or other relatives. It is God because it is a loving thing for God to take us and to say you are producing good fruits, you are connected, but here is a way you could do better. Prune this harmful habit out of your life. Prune this attitude out of your life. God’s pruning is not an attack, but an act of love. The false, the harmful within us needs to be pruned. An infection left alone can cause great damage. It has to be removed. Holding each other accountable is not the same thing as judging one another. It’s about protecting this living thing, this church, which is God’s.

The Greek word for prune is also the Greek word for cleanse, cleanse or shape. God has already cleansed and shaped us by Jesus’ words and Jesus’ teaching, and people are shaped throughout their lives by Christian faith, and so the idea is that we grow in this fruit of the spirit, and you know from Scripture what the fruit of the spirit is. It is love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and gentleness and faithfulness and self-control. If you don’t have at least one of those in which you need to grow, then I’ll declare you a saint right now and dismiss you. We all have areas to grow.

Jesus said, “I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing.” Apart from God we do wither from lack of spiritual nourishment, and we struggle to bear fruit, but in the vine, we’re part of a network of branches, supporting one another, and all supported upon Christ. Disconnected and alone, we can sing all the songs, we can worship all we want, we can study the Bible, we can do service

The Reverend James D. Dennis, Jr.

May 14, 2006

projects and come to every supper and every committee meeting, and get nothing out of it! I have had people tell me that has been their church life. I have done it all, and I've enjoyed not one moment. I have sought peace and joy and kindness and patience and compassion, but I have felt none of it, and so I know that this is possible. Worst of all, disconnected from God in this way, God gets nothing out of it. You see, the church gets nothing out of it, which is God's plan to reveal His action in the world. Those wandering in darkness get nothing out of it. If all you do, if they seek light, and they see none of it in all that you do, then they get no witness, no hope, and we have failed. If neither you nor others notice the fruit of the spirit in your life then we may have a broken connection going on here. The way we witness is for others to look at us, to look at this thing called the church, and say, “See how they love each other! See how they support one another! See how they laugh with those who laugh and celebrate! See how they cry with those who mourn and grieve! See how they love one another!” If they don't see it, if you don't see it, and don't ever think about it, then how are we the church? How are we connected to the living vine of Jesus Christ? Perhaps we need some pruning. Remember the fruit of the spirit. It is spelled out, and if it is growing in us and through us, it will attract others, and you will be able to see it. Engrafted in Christ we bear fruit of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and gentleness and faithfulness and self-control. If we aren't producing these things, a crop for God's kingdom, then we need to allow the master gardener to prune away our excess baggage, our selfishness, our negativity, our meaningless pursuits and hobbies. Our lives are the fruits of the kingdom that Jesus was talking about. They are meant to be. Most importantly our lives either witness to God's reality and work in the world or not.

I want to close with a true story. It happened in the early 1900s. An outspoken atheist named Charles Bradlaw challenged a preacher named Hughes to a public debate in London. Now, the preacher said, “I'll gladly accept your challenge, but on one condition. I would like to bring 100 men and women to the debate that can be witnesses to the redeeming love of God. These men and women will demonstrate for unbelievers how God has turned their lives around and filled them with fruit of the spirit.” The preacher asked his atheist challenger to do the same thing. “You bring 100 people to be witnesses for your side of the debate, how they were helped by not believing in God.” Well, the debate never happened. The atheist did not show up. Reverend Hughes and the 100 men and women that he brought turned it into a sort of worship/revival/faith-sharing experience, and they all told their stories about how the power of God in Christ and the presence of the Holy Spirit had melted their hearts, remolded their lives, and connected them to God and with compassion to each other.

I hope, I hope that I've made it just a tiny bit clearer from this brief, brief piece of Scripture that God's kingdom does not grow in some abstract way by just adding names on a church roll. It grows by being connected to God in Christ, and by bearing these fruits in such an obvious and glorious way that others see and are drawn magnetically to the same God, who is the source of our strength, of our peace, of our joy, of our gentleness, of our faithfulness, our self-control, our love. That source, the true vine, Jesus Christ. Amen.