

Heavenly Vine, Worldly Branches

John 15:1-11

May 20, 2007

I.

Outside London is a magnificent old structure called Hampton Court Palace. It was built by Cardinal Woolsey in the sixteenth century, and as Henry VIII began to appreciate its majestic and imposing nature he became jealous and forced the Cardinal to hand it over as Woolsey fell from royal favor.

What does this have to do with anything? Well, in the Hampton Court gardens there still grows a grapevine that was planted in 1768. It is the largest and oldest known grapevine in the world, according to people who keep track of such things. And it still is thriving and producing fruit.

The reason the great vine at Hampton Court still survives and produces grapes today is that it has received proper care. The dead branches have been removed, the new growth has been lifted away from the dirt, and the producing branches have been pruned to stimulate greater production of fruit.

Now, perhaps, it is more apparent as to where I'm going with this. Today's reading calls up the imagery of the vine, and in it Jesus tells us what God wants for us in our lives.

And perhaps the metaphors, these illustrations, of the vine, and pruning, and being fruitful might be better understood by people who live in wine country, but I think they also are clear to us as well.

We are called to take them seriously. Jesus was speaking in a very serious setting. We recall the reading last week where Jesus finished talking to the disciples at the Last Supper. In today's reading, which follows last week's reading, Jesus and the disciples have left the upper room and are either on their way to, or have reached, the garden at Gethsemane, where Jesus soon would be arrested.

So, the things Jesus said were like his Last Will and Testament to his disciples. He was giving final instructions to the men he had recruited from the shores and hills of Galilee to be with him all this time, as well as to others who joined along the way. This was serious stuff then, and it still is today.

II.

Jesus said today that he is the vine, and perhaps we should review a little terminology. In winegrowers' or vintners' terms, the vines are not those long things that grow along the trellis; those are the branches. The vine is the basic trunk of the plant that grows out of the ground, then the branches grow out from the vine, and the grapes grow from the branches.

So in the reading we see the Jesus is the vine. He is the root, the source of life and sustenance to the branches, and we are the branches who depend upon the vine for our own lives and all that we have or ever could hope to be.

Then we see that God the Father is the gardener, the vinedresser who cares for the branches because the branches produce the fruit. And just as the vinedressers' job in a real vineyard is to get as much fruit from the branches as possible, so also the Father wants us, as the so-called branches attached to Jesus the vine, to produce as much fruit as possible. He wants us to be fruitful in our lives.

This metaphor of fruitfulness is common in the New Testament. Matthew said in 12:33 that we "make a tree good and its fruit will be good, or make a tree bad and its fruit will be bad, for a tree is recognized by its fruit." Luke said in 6:43-44 that "no good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit." St. Paul prayed in Col. 1:10 that we "may lead lives worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, as you bear fruit in every good work and as you grow in the knowledge of God."

Matthew, Luke, and Paul were not talking about horticulture. They weren't giving lessons about farming. They were concerned about how people lived their lives; whether they were fruitful lives or not.

And we also will soon see that if we as the branches do not take much from Jesus, if we are not truly in the vine, then the Father will step in to correct that situation. Branches that do not produce fruit will be removed. Branches that produce little fruit will be pruned.

But, I get ahead of myself. First, let's ask what it means to be fruitful. Well, St. Paul also told us in Gal 5:22-23 that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." And he said in Col. 1:10 that bearing fruit is living lives worthy of the Lord, and growing in the knowledge of God.

In a way we can bear inner fruit and outer fruit. The first type is having an inner sense of joy, peace, and comfort that comes with obedience, prayer, and trying to live a holy life. And this can lead to outer manifestations of fruit, which is helping others, engaging in ministry in the community, and doing things in God's name to show God's glory to others.

So we can see how this biblical metaphor about the vine and the branches operates. Jesus the vine is necessary to our ability as branches to bear fruit, to live the lives we are called to live. And God the Father is the gardener, the vinedresser, who takes what we receive from Jesus and works on us to make us more fruitful in order to increase our spiritual yield.

III.

But how does God do this work? How does he make us more fruitful? The reading identifies two ways. First, he removes the branches that do not bear fruit. Second, he prunes the branches that bear some fruit in order that they might be even more fruitful.

This is a common practice in many types of agricultural settings. Branches draw nutrients from the soil that spread throughout the plant, whatever type of plant it is. And the more branches there are, the less nutrients there are available per branch. So if a branch is not producing, it is removed so that the branches that remain can be stronger.

And for the branches that remain, even they can start to grow wild and divert nutrients to making the branch grow instead of making the fruit grow. So those branches are pruned back to enable the plant to increase its production.

IV.

Today's reading tells us that the same thing happens to us. God works on us to get rid of things in our lives that are not fruitful. If there are dead branches within us that prevent us from being what he wants us to be, he will let us know so that they can be removed. If we have bad habits to overcome, or have allowed worldly things to push our faith into the background, he will give us that message.

And even if we are producing a little fruit, so to speak, God still works to prune us so that we might be even more fruitful. If we have priorities that ought to be reordered, or values that

need to be revised, he will work within us to channel the spiritual nutrients into the fruit rather than other things.

But we have to cooperate. We have to be obedient and respond to what God through the Holy Spirit is trying to do within us. How many times have you felt a little supernatural nudge about something that wasn't quite right in your life? How many times, after the fact, have you asked yourself "Why did I do that?" How many times has something happened as a consequence of something you did where you thought, or at least suspected, that you were being given a message?

And these things happen to us because we are Christians. They happen because God loves us and wants blessings for us. They happen because we, as Christians, have a higher calling to live holy lives and to walk in the light. And, most importantly, they happen to us because we cannot bear fruit of ourselves, in our own strength. We must be connected to the vine, and we must be able to take what the vine gives us and use it as we are called to do.

Today's reading tells us that if we remain in Jesus, and his words remain in us, then we show ourselves to be his disciples and we bear much fruit. But Jesus also makes it clear that in order to remain in him we must obey his commandments. We talked about this last week and the theme continues here. To bear fruit, to live truly Christian lives, we must be obedient to what Jesus told us. If we do not, then the Father will step in to nudge us back to where we are called to be.

This idea is set forth in the Book of Hebrews 12:9-10 which tells us that "we had human parents to discipline us, and we respected them. Should we not be even more willing to be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For they disciplined us for a short time as seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, in order that we may share his holiness."

This is why God enters our lives through the Holy Spirit to guide us on the path. But if we think we are being disciplined, we should know it is because we are loved. It is not punitive but corrective. We are being called to obedience, and if we truly listen we can hear, we can follow, and we can bear fruit.

V.

Today's reading has a strong message wrapped in a somewhat pastoral and tranquil image. Jesus used the imagery of the vine, and the branches, and the fruit to convey a rather specific and direct idea that boils down to obedience and doing what he says. I probably have used the words "must" and "should" and "we are called" more times today than I usually do.

But Jesus said what he said. He made it clear that we cannot have the warm and loving idea of Christ without the doctrines and teachings of Christ. And he also made it clear that we must be part of him and remain in him always if we are to be what he wants us to be and what we can be by following his word and commandments.

We have a choice, and the choice does not affect our salvation in the next world because Jesus was speaking about life in this world to people who, like us, already were believers. We can believe that we are saved in the end, but there still is the question of what kind of lives do we want right now? Our lives can be full and fruitful, or they can be dry and withered. We can do things his way, or we can do things our way. I pray that we choose to be fruitful branches in the body of Christ. *Amen.*