

Fruit Of The Vine

John 15:1-11

May 10, 2009

I.

Today is Mother's Day, when we honor those through whom God's gift of life became evident in the world. And we can look at Mother's Day from the perspective of both children and mothers.

A child's viewpoint might be characterized by the story of a teenage boy who came into the house totally famished, a familiar condition with teenage boys, and found his mother in bed not feeling well. He said, "Don't worry about dinner, Mom, I'll carry you down to the stove."

And from a mother's perspective, there probably were times when some moms felt like the woman who was asked if she still would have children if she had it to do all over again. "Of course," she replied, "just not the same ones."

But in all seriousness, we offer thanksgiving and appreciation to our mothers. We remember the blessings they gave and the sacrifices they made, even when they were weary, overworked, and tired. And we know that they love us and never would replace us with anyone else.

And in a way today's reading about the vine, the branches, and the fruit parallels Mother's Day. Just as our mothers gave us worldly life and helped us grow up and be fruitful, we will see that Jesus does the same in a spiritual sense.

II.

But let's begin with some background. Outside London is a magnificent old structure called Hampton Court Palace. It was built by the famous Cardinal Woolsey in the sixteenth century, and as King Henry VIII began to appreciate its beauty and majestic nature he became jealous and forced the Cardinal to hand it over to him 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 survives and produces grapes today is that it has received proper care. Dead branches have been removed, new growth has been lifted from the dirt, and producing branches have been pruned to stimulate even greater production.

Now, perhaps, it's more apparent where I'm going with this. Today's reading shows how Jesus used the imagery of the vine, the branches, and the fruit to tell the disciples, and by extension to tell us, what God wants for us in our lives.

And we are called to take these words seriously. Jesus was speaking in a serious setting. He had just finished the Last Supper, and soon would be arrested. This was 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, as well as others who joined along the way.

III.

And he began by saying he is the vine, which perhaps should lead to review of some 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 those branches who depend upon the vine for our faith, our spirituality, and our relationship with God.

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 a vinedresser's job in a real vineyard is to produce as many grapes from the branches as possible, so also the Father wants us, as the branches attached to Jesus the vine, to be as fruitful as possible in our lives.

This metaphor of fruitfulness is common in the New Testament. Matthew said 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" (12:33). Luke said that "no good tree bears bad fruit, nor does a bad tree bear good fruit. Each tree is recognized by its own fruit" (6:43-44). St. Paul prayed in Colossians 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" (1:10).

Matthew, Luke, and Paul were not talking about horticulture. They weren't giving lessons about farming. They were concerned about whether people lived fruitful lives in Christ.

So, let's ask what it means to be fruitful. St. Paul told us in the Book of Galatians that "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control" (5:22-23). And he said in Colossians that bearing fruit is living lives worthy of the Lord, and growing in the knowledge of God (1:10).

In a way we can bear inner fruit and outer fruit. The first type is an inner sense of joy and peace 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, ministry in the community, and doing things that show God's glory to others. Fruit within us can lead to more fruit that helps others.

So, let's summarize how this metaphor about the vine and branches and fruit operates. Jesus the vine is necessary to our ability as branches to bear fruit. And God the Father is the gardener, the vinedresser, who takes what we receive from Jesus and works on us and shapes us to make us even more fruitful in order to deepen our faith and spirituality.

IV.

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. These images might make us cringe a little, but we soon will see how they work for God's purposes.

Cutting and pruning are common practices in many agricultural settings. Branches draw nutrients from the soil that spread throughout the plant. And the more branches there are, the less nutrients there are available for each branch. As a result, if a branch is not producing it is removed so that the remaining branches can be stronger.

And those branches that remain also can start to grow wild and use nutrients to make the branch grow instead of making the fruit grow, which is the wrong objective. So those branches are pruned back, which enables the plant to increase its production.

Today's reading tells us the same thing happens to us. God works on us to get rid of unfruitful things in our lives. 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 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 just little fruit, God still prunes 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.

V.

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

And these things happen because God loves us and wants blessings for us, and because we are called to live holy lives and walk in the light. And, most importantly, they happen because we cannot bear fruit 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. If we do not, then the Father will step in to remove our unproductive branches and prune the ones growing the wrong way.

This idea also is set forth in the Book of Hebrews, 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" (12:9-10).

This is why God enters our lives through the Holy Spirit to guide us. But if we think we are being disciplined, we should know that it is corrective rather than punitive. If we truly listen we can hear, we can follow, and we can bear fruit.

VI.

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 specific idea that boils down to doing what Jesus says. And 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. 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 I want to be clear that 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. The imagery of branches being thrown into the fire is not that of final judgment, but rather the burning away of unproductive and spiritually useless things in our lives.

So, even though we know that we are saved in the end, there remains the question of what kind of lives 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, and that, as the gospel says, his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. *Amen.*