

Fruitful Lives

John 15:1-8

May 6, 2012

I.

Outside London is a magnificent and majestic old structure called Hampton Court Palace. It was built in the sixteenth century by the famous Cardinal Wolsey, who at one point in his career was Lord Chancellor to King Henry VIII, and the highest ranking official in the church.

But Wolsey fell out of favor with Henry because he failed to obtain an annulment of the King's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and thus the King was delayed in his plans to marry Anne Boleyn. This prompted Henry to strip Wolsey of his property and to take possession of Hampton Court Palace.

So, what does this have to do with anything? How does it relate to any of our readings? Well, in the Hampton Court Palace 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.

Information from the Palace tells us that the vine has a single root with a circumference of over twelve feet. Some of its branches are over 120 feet long, and it still produces almost a half ton of grapes each year. That information certainly clears everything up, doesn't it?

If not, let's look a little further. 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.

Perhaps it's now more apparent where I'm going with this. Just as the great vine at Hampton Court has remained fruitful because it has been maintained, today's gospel reading shows how Jesus used imagery of the vine, and branches, and fruit to tell the disciples, and by extension to tell us, how God wants our lives to be fruitful.

In fact, our reading, which is only eight brief verses, mentions fruit six times. And it also uses the word "abide" eight times. The dictionary tells us that "abide" means to "live," "dwell," or "take up residence." And "fruit" in the reading describes the results and products of our lives each day; the output and offerings we bring to ourselves, to others, and to the church.

And the message here is that if we abide in Jesus, we will be fruitful. But how do we do that? It does not happen automatically. Abiding in Jesus is not like simply moving into a house or checking into a hotel. It means being part of something larger than ourselves, and without which we cannot spiritually survive. We are the branches and Jesus is the vine, and we live in him

II.

But before going further, let's review 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.

And the reading tells us 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 echoed this when he 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).

And 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 talking about living productive and meaningful lives in Christ.

So, let's ask what it means to be fruitful. 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).

There can be two ways to be fruitful. One is outside; the other is inside. Inner fruit is a sense of joy and peace that comes with obedience, prayer, and a holy life. And it leads to outer manifestations of fruit, which are faithful worship, ministry in the community, and living God's word. Fruit within us can lead to fruit from us that is an example to and helps others.

So, to summarize, 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.

III.

But how does God make us more fruitful? The reading identifies two ways. First, he removes branches that do not bear fruit. Second, he prunes branches that bear some fruit in order that they might be even more fruitful. And images of being pruned might make us cringe a little, but we can see how they work for God's purposes.

Cutting and pruning are common agricultural practices. 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 nutrients can go to the branches that are producing.

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 shows that 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 fruit rather than other things.

IV.

But we have to cooperate and respond to what God through the Holy Spirit does within us. How many times have we felt a little supernatural nudge about something? How many times have we asked ourselves, "Why did I do or say that?" How many times has something happened when we thought we 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 walk in the light of Christ. And, most importantly, they happen because we cannot bear fruit on our own. 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 live in Jesus his words will live in us. Then we are his disciples and we bear much fruit. But if we do not, the Father will 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 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 along the paths of righteousness. It is a good and fulfilling thing, not a burden. If we listen to the Word we can live the Word, and we will bear much fruit.

We will experience this idea next month when we begin our program of 40 Days in the Word, which already has been presented to you, and is described in more detail in our May newsletter. Please be open to participating in this transforming journey as we discuss it in coming weeks.

V.

Today's reading has a strong message wrapped in a pastoral image. Jesus used the imagery of the vine, and the branches, and the fruit to convey the reality that we must be part of him and remain in him in order to truly partake of life.

And I want to emphasize that today's reading is about the here and now. It is not about salvation in the next world because Jesus was speaking of life in this world to people who, like us, already were believers. Imagery of branches burned in the fire is not that of final judgment, but rather the burning away of unproductive and spiritually useless things in our lives now.

So, even though we know that we are saved in the end, there remains the question of what kind of lives we want at this moment. Our lives can be full and fruitful, or they can be more dry and withered. We can do things God's way and be blessed, or we can do things our way and be blighted.

I pray that we choose to be fruitful branches in the body of Christ, and that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. *Amen.*