

Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)
John 15:1-8
Preacher: Vicar, Jim Goodyear

St. Peter's Lafayette Hill, PA
May 10, 2009

Fruit of the Vine

I find yard work relaxing. No, I am not for hire! I enjoy working in a vegetable or flower garden. There is something about working the ground with my hands that I find enjoyable. The first house I owned was nearly an acre. On the property was a small orchard of 9 trees, a strawberry patch, an asparagus patch, a grape vine and flower gardens around the perimeter of the house and two garages. Back then I was younger and not afraid of tackling something like this and I had no children yet, so much of my spare time was spent working outside in the gardens.

I knew a little about caring for vegetables and flowers, but when it came to the orchard and grapevine, I had no idea what was involved to care for them properly. I quickly learned there was more to it than letting nature take its course and hope for a fruitful harvest. The pruning of fruit trees is quite involved. Each type of tree has a specific shape needed to yield a harvest of edible fruits. Pruning takes place before the sap begins to run in the spring. Then you spray them with an oil to seal the cut edges to ensure the nutrients of the soil will go to the new growth. As the tree blossoms, depending on the size of fruit you want, you pull off some of the blossoms so specific fruits receive all the nutrients. All for a single basket of fruit! A lot of work, but for me it was a time to be outside and enjoy the world around me. The grape vine in order to yield fruit, needed to be pruned to almost nothing. It looked like the vine would die because of the amount of pruning that was done; and yet the yield was tremendous.

John reminds us that Jesus is the vine and God is the vine grower. Jesus is the branch or vine that holds all Gods people together. No one can get to the Father except through me. To be rooted in God, Jesus is the vine that holds it all together. The nourishment for living comes through Jesus. God is in charge of the development of the living branches. Those connected to Jesus. In time, God prunes the vine to bear fruit. God calls us to abide unto him and he will abide in the branches. It is a living connection between God and each of us through Jesus.

To bear fruit, the vine needs to be pruned to receive the nutrients for living. Like the orchard trees, each vine, each person is pruned to a specific shape to do God's work. The shaping of each person is based on the gifts given to each. Using those gifts, to grow, we abide in the Father, the vine grower. But when we do not abide in God, we are nothing but a branch cut from the tree unable to receive nourishment. It is those branches that wither and are tossed into the fire. Pruning is not done to harm or cut off the unproductive branches; pruning is done to make a closer connection to the main plant; to God through Jesus. Pruning gives new life to the plant.

The creation account reminds us that everything God created was proclaimed good. Sometimes our spindly presence is still valued by the Lord. You see, God is good at pruning—really good. God is able to take the humblest branch and prune it back just right so that it will soon flourish and bring forth a bounty of good fruit. God keeps us connected to the vine even when we're tempted to take off like a bean runner. Don't get me wrong; pruning is painful. To get the new growth that is capable of yielding a good harvest, the dead parts have to go. Being pruned is a humbling experience and can leave one feeling vulnerable and small. Yet out of that vulnerability, out of that place of discomfort, blossoms a new creation. The things of life we find difficult to endure is a pruning. We get knocked off our high horse and realize what we were doing was not producing good fruit. When we lose a loved one, a job, a drop in our financial portfolio, not do as well on a math test; on the surface you feel distraught, angry. But when you sit with God in the moment, the situation becomes bearable and you grow from it. You bear good fruit.

Jesus says branches grow off Him and some don't bear fruit. The labels we put on others "Christian", "Catholic", "Evangelical", "Pentecostal", male, female, single, married, straight, gay - don't prove that a person is joined with the true vine. Would-be disciples, who show no mercy to others and who don't love their neighbours, are branches that bear no fruit! The loveless or merciless branch will be eliminated! I'm sure none of us have pointed fingers at another person, or said seemingly innocent words that hurt, or had thoughts of 'let someone else do that, I've done my share'. Sure all of us become tired at doing some tasks, but when we realize God gives to us all we need and we know we can help others, it is God's love for God's people that calls us to action. To love and care for each other.

Many people think pruning useless branches, those that bear no fruit,

ought to be done by the people, through society's justice. Jesus says in this passage that the Father does the pruning. It seems to me that the Father does the pruning through people! Jesus is saying that He is the people and we, the people, will be united with Him by being united with the people. This might seem contradictory. When we realize all of us are connected to the same vine, feed by the same God, cared for by Jesus, our connection is the love we have for each other. The same love God has for each of us. The grapevine is the plant of love. The pruning is so that humanity may produce more love! To get a large quantity of wine many branches have to be pruned back! Pruning draws us closer to the true vine. Pray for the pruning, painful as it might be. God desires that we bloom and grow.

Sometime in the history of the church, love was put on a pedestal while the work of the world swirled below and around it. Love of God and love of neighbor were no longer the drivers they had been in the ministry of Jesus. They were great concepts but the world was involved in the reality of power struggles, whose Church it really was, claims of being the one true church that would protect the faith, claiming a divine directive to change the world, regardless of what the rest of the world wanted -- much like the struggles we witness and see today. We use that word love so much, even in the midst of our disagreements with one another. It has too often become a weapon rather than a reconciler. We have forgotten how God's love is meant to be the essence of our life and faith. The vineyard, the world around us, has been choked with weeds and brambles. It has become almost impossible to identify the original plant.

Solidarity with Jesus is the condition for bearing fruit and the bond that defines God's people. Jesus affirms this before His death. He had His own death in mind. And He could have been thinking of the deaths of the many others who would follow His way! A part of humanity is going to be, "cut off" in order that there will be no injustice in humanity. Jesus says the Father will give those who remain in Him, anything they ask. "In His name" means, "in Jesus' spirit". It is asking "in the name" while the one who asks, is united in accord with Jesus' teachings; the teachings of equality. And those who ask in that way infallibly receive whatever they ask because with Jesus they are united with God.

God is love; love one another. How many times have we heard those statements? So often that we no longer hear the depth of love that is spoken? Will they really know we are Christians by our love? No matter how choked the plant has become, the love that we hear so many times that Jesus speaks

of is still there. The vine has not died. But it needs so many of us to gently cut through the choking weeds to find the original plant. It needs so many of us to once again nurture the plant by pruning the plant so that it has space to grow and begins to come into the light again. It's a difficult job to do, this gardening task. The weeds have thorns and they insist on hanging on to the vine. But we have to do it. We have to carefully remember that we are charged with caring for this vine that is God's love. We cannot let ourselves get distracted by focusing on one particularly nasty weed or on the blood coming from the thorns of the weed. Our task is to care for the plant that is God's love and helping others to nourish themselves from its fruit. Our goal is to be the best branch in the body of Christ that we can possibly be. We want to bear good fruit. We are grafted to the vine, adopted children who finds our every movement and very being in Jesus. Sometimes our leaves get scorched, and we feel a little wilted as the cares of the world close in around us. You'd think that we'd try to draw strength from the vine in such times, but it so happens that those parched seasons are the very times we think we can go it alone and do things our way.

On this Mother's Day we celebrate the life the women in our lives have contributed to our growing. A mother's love is like that of Gods love. A love that endures through the pain of childbearing, the diapers and potty training, the difficult teen years, the realization that her child has become an adult and desires to discover the world for themselves. A love that heals the bumps and bruises, kisses away the pain that lifts each of us to a place of comfort; a love that prunes each of us gently and give us strength to bear fruit. Such a simple task but so difficult. We can't wait for better weather or for someone else to take care of the task of tending that vine of love. That's our task, no matter what distracts us or keeps us from that task. One weed at a time -- thorns or not-- so that the vine and branches again see the light of day and the world can enjoy the fruit. To be united to Jesus is to be united to others, to be united in community. Through a small community the disciples is united to a larger community of Jesus' disciples. Just as a small branch is joined to a bigger branch - all the vinebranches together - are Christ! Branches don't bear fruit unless they're united to the whole plant and likewise with the disciples and the community in the spirit of Jesus.