

“ Pruned to Bear Fruit”

Pastor Dave Carlson
First Presbyterian Church
Sunday, May 13, 2012

First Lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7
Second Lesson: John 15:1-8

NPR interviewer Terry Gross once asked Maurice Sendak, creators of the children's book "Where the Wild Things Are", to share some of his favorite comments from readers. Sendak replied, "Oh, there's so many. Can I give you just one that I really like? It was from a little boy. He sent me a charming card with a little drawing. I loved it. I answer all my children's letters – sometimes very hastily – but this one I lingered over. I sent him a postcard and I drew a picture of a Wild Thing on it. I wrote, "Dear Jim, I loved your card." Then I got a letter back from his mother and she said, "Jim loved you card so much he ate it." "That, to me" said Sendak "was one of the highest compliments I've ever received. He didn't care that it was an original drawing or anything. He saw it, he loved it, he ate it." As some of you may know from last week's news, Sendak died on Tuesday. But listening to his story about the little boy who loved what Sendak gave him so much that he ate it, I like to think that a little bit of Sendak lives on in that little boy.

Jesus, when he says, "Abide in me as I abide in you," is opening the way for us to have Jesus live on in us, alive in our day-to-day world, no matter what.

Today we look at how we abide in Christ and Christ abides in us. How much do we have to do, or give, or serve in order to have our lives bring forth fruitful blessings? And why does it seem so hard for us to stay focused on Christ, to have a sense that Jesus is there along side us day in and day out. These are the questions we will look at this morning: how do we become good Christians with Jesus in our hearts at all times, and how much work does that take. When Jesus says, "I am the true vine," he's saying that he is the source and location from which all goodness and blessings arises in the world. As Christians, we come to understand this "vine-like" relationship with Jesus as the body of Christ, the church. It is the church universal that is the body of Christ, the "true vine" from which life springs forth for all people who seek to serve God and follow Jesus Christ not only in their worship, their service and giving, and in their study but also in our families, our relationships, and in all aspects of our lives; serving God and following Jesus Christ. Being this type of Christian does take a lot of work. But in reality, the work that needs done is not for us to do. **God does the work.** All we need to do is present ourselves daily to God for whatever work God might do in and through our lives. "I am the true vine," says Jesus – the true source of all that is good in life – "and my Father is the vine-grower." God is the vine-grower; God is the worker, not us. The word used for "vine-grower" is the Greek noun *gergos*. *Gergos* literally means farmer or vinekeeper. However, if we split *gergos* into its two syllables, we see that *ge-* means earth, and *-rgos* means worker. So God is the earth-worker, the one who tills the soil and works with it in order to plant the true vine in the earth. In his day, Jesus was literally planted in the earth, through his life, death and burial; and he sprouted out of the earth in his resurrection. In our day, the Spirit of God works to plant Jesus in the "earth," the soil of men and women – the hearts and minds and souls of people of all ages – so that the seed of Jesus Christ might spring forth and become a source of goodness and rich blessings.

So really, when we ask how much do we have to do, or give, or serve to have our lives bear rich, fruitful blessings, the answer is not much. In fact, we don't have to "do" anything. We don't have to "work" to give anything or to "serve" anyone in order to see rich blessings spring forth from who we are as followers of Christ. Because, when we let God shape us, when we let God cut away those things that keep us from growing into the people God created us to be, then rich blessings just naturally take root and arise all around us. And all we have to do is let God work in our lives, even when the work to be done involves some pruning – cutting away dead branches, withered leaves, rotten fruit. Now, in explaining this to his disciples – to us – Jesus twice talks about the word that he has spoken to us. He says, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." And then later, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Now that's a promise of rich and fruitful blessings in life if ever I've heard one. But to gain access to that promise, we need to tap into the Word of God. Jesus Christ's word to us – the good news of the Gospel and the truth of Holy Scripture – is where we have to go to have God work in our lives. By participating in Sunday school and Bible studies, by attending worship and listening carefully to the scriptures and sermons, by reading and praying and listening for God's word for us this day and every day, we gain access to the tools to have God shape us and shape our lives to bear rich, fruitful blessings. And all this takes is for us to be OK with God doing a little pruning. And in doing that, we may have to endure **a little pain and discomfort**. But that's all it takes. And while often it does take a little painful pruning, the process of having God work in our lives is not without its joyous, lighter moments, if we just turn ourselves over to God's word.

Mr. Lee was terribly overweight. So his doctor put him on a diet. "I want you to eat regularly for two days," he said, "then skip a day, and repeat this procedure for two weeks. The next time I see you, you'll have lost at least five pounds." When Mr. Lee returned, the doctor was shocked to see he had lost nearly 60 pounds. "Why, that's amazing!" said the doctor. "Did you follow my instructions?" Mr. Lee nodded and said, "I'll tell you, though, I thought I was going to drop dead that third day." "From hunger, you mean?" asked the doctor. "No, from skipping." Eat two days and then skip a day.

Sometimes, the purpose and meaning of God's word to us, of God's work in our lives at any given moment – eludes us. "Eat two days and then skip a day." The doctor saw Mr. Lee and had an idea for how to make a difference in his life. God saw Mr. Lee and his willingness to go through a little pain and discomfort to gain a great big blessing, and God spoke a different word to him. God took the goal of losing five pounds in two weeks and multiplied it 12 times over. Now, neither the doctor nor Mr. Lee could imagine a 60-pound weight loss (which of course isn't possible or healthy in just two weeks). But the point of the story is that neither of these people could see the abundantly rich blessing that God was ready to make possible. Mr. Lee didn't understand the doctor's instructions, and yet, because he was willing to faithfully follow them anyway, God provided an amazing outcome. Sometimes we don't understand God's instructions in our lives. We hear Jesus talking about being the "true vine," and God being the "vine-grower," and us being "branches," and we're like, "What?" But Jesus' words about the vine-grower would have been clearly understood by the people listening to him that day. And if we pray and study and meditate on God's word to us, it becomes clear in our day, too. When Jesus says, "Every branch that bears fruit (God) prunes to make it bear more fruit," we, like the people in Jesus' day, are invited to imagine a vineyard of grapes being tended by a nurturing and loving vine-grower in order to produce the most abundant harvest of the best grapes in

all the world. That's what we are in Jesus Christ, a vineyard or hillside or field with an abundantly rich crop of blessings just waiting to spring forth among us, all around us, and within us. And another thing that the people gathered around Jesus that day would have clearly understood is that not all branches in the vineyard produce good fruit. Not everyone is open to serving God and following Christ. Not all aspects of our lives are attuned to God's word. But for those of us who are open to serving God and following Christ, God is there to shape us to be all that we're intended to be. And for most of us, that takes some serious and continuous pruning.

Bruce Wilkinson, in his book "Secrets of the Vine," notes that "grapevines need pruning, and so do Christians." And while God's pruning can be a little painful, Wilkinson argues that it is necessary in order for our lives to give rise to the fruitful blessings that Jesus is talking about. "... If you don't know and apply Jesus' vineyard teachings about being open to God's pruning and shaping you," says Wilkinson, "you'll never experience the abundant life you long for. There is simply no other way."¹ And yet, we don't like to have pieces of our lives pruned and cut away do we? It's never easy for us to give up parts of who we are, even if they don't really serve who we were created to be. This is why it seems so hard to stay focused on Christ, to have a sense of Jesus standing along side us day in and day out – because we resist the pruning. We resist the work that God is doing in our lives. That's what makes God's pruning so painful – our resistance, much more so than the actual giving up or taking away of whatever it is that has to go, whatever it is that's keeping us from seeing abundant and rich and fruitful blessings arise in and around our lives. One Bible study suggests that we can ease our pain and decrease our resistance as God is shaping us by looking at all of life's irritations as a form of pruning by God. Consider for instance: traffic jams, long lines, misplaced keys, cold food, answering machines, nosy neighbors, being rushed, tight clothes, flat tires and doing dishes. Uhg! Now think how our perspective might change if we were to view each of these irritations as an opportunity to become more like Jesus. More accepting of life and our limitations, more open to who God would have us to be in any and all situations, whether they be joyous and troublesome; able to serve God and follow Jesus, come what may, just by who we're being at any moment; just by the vine-like attachment we have to God and God's word in our lives. While God may be pleased with whatever we've accomplished, when all is said and done, God is far more interested in whether we've remained connected to our faith and allowed ourselves to be reshaped by God's word, that we might better reflect the true nature of Jesus Christ to others.² So no, we don't have to work all that hard to be a channel – a branch, if you will – drawing from the source of God's rich blessings. That's just who we are as part of God's bountiful creation. And as long as we remain connected to the source of creation – connected to the "true vine" that is Jesus Christ – as long as we continue to see ourselves as branches on the vine of Jesus Christ, we can't help but see and experience the fruit of abundantly rich blessings **arising in us**, in our lives and throughout the world. Amen.

¹ Cindy Crosby, Amazon.com review of Bruce Wilkinson's book *Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance*, amazon.com. Retrieved December 3, 2002.

² Nancy McGuirk, God's pruning can be painful, *Women's Community Bible Study*, christianity.com. Retrieved December 5, 2002.

PASTORAL PRAYER

Creator God, like a loving parent, you have guided us to this place today. On this Mother's day we give thanks for all mothers. Thank you for the mothers who gave birth to us, as well as those who have treated us as if we were their own children. Today we lift up the single mothers in prayer. Strengthen them when they are tired. We pray for working mothers. Help them find balance and time for quiet moments with you. We ask you to be with mothers of new graduates, and with our new High School graduates: Ellie Esry, Emily Grotenhuis, Shayna Snider, Derek Kraus and Dylan Foster, as well as with Emily Warren and Dezzarae Harris, who got their GEDs this year. Prepare them for this new phase in life filled with opportunities for service.

Comfort those who are missing their mothers today and be with those mothers who are missing their children. Lord, help us make this place, this community, a space where all feel a mother's love, a place where their gifts and talents are appreciated and nurtured. When we step beyond these walls today, help us create a world where mothers can raise their children in peace. We ask these things in the name of Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.