



good shepherd
presbyterian church

Disciples

John 15

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I love that Jesus is so good at painting pictures with words. He will take what could easily be complicated theological truths and simplify them with a word-picture so just about anyone can understand. As we continue in our Journey to Easter from the Gospel of John, we are going to look today at the relationship between God the Father, God the Son, and those who follow Jesus.

In John 15, Jesus teaches about these relationships using the image of a grape vine. He first describes the relationship between himself and God the Father. Then he teaches about his own relationship to us. Finally, he breaks out of the word picture to speak directly to the way that he connects us to the love of God. It is a vivid and compelling picture and helps us understand what it means to be followers of Christ.

The FRUIT: Vine and Vinedresser (vv. 1-4)

Jesus begins with a picture of Himself and the Father: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser." (v. 1) Now it is important to not try to over-do the metaphor. We don't need to figure out everything there is to be known about vines or vinedressers. Jesus is not offering a comprehensive explanation of who he is or who God is. Rather, he tells us exactly what this image is to teach us, and in these first verses it's all about the FRUIT.

And there are two specifics here for us:

1. The vine-dresser is interested in fruit and prunes the branches that don't bear any. (v. 2)
2. The vine is necessary to the fruit-bearing capability of the branches. (vv. 3-4)

What is the "fruit" in which the vine-dresser is interested? What is the fruit that is produced because of the connection with the vine and how does that connection work?

Jesus drops the metaphor in v. 3 and reveals those things. The fruit is being "clean" before God – another metaphor, but one more easily understood as being cleansed of sin... that is, being made right with God. And Jesus says we are clean because of the Word he has spoken to us... God's message, the truth, the Good News about the Kingdom and about Jesus.

So cleansing from sin is Jesus' work (good thing!); but we experience and accept and appropriate that work through listening and obeying God's Word, written and Living. As Jesus says – there is no fruit apart from Him! (v.4) We reflect that in our order of worship. We listen to God's Word and then we confess our sin and accept the grace of God in Christ. It's like regular tending and maintenance of the grape vine. It's also why we worship regularly: to be nourished, fed, and cultivated by God through scripture and Christ. Jesus is describing how God works in us!

The CONNECTION: Vine and Branches (vv. 5-8)

Back in the vine image in verse 5, Jesus explicitly focuses on the CONNECTION in the vine and names us as "branches." Now he says, "I am the vine, you are the branches." And now he explores in more detail the relationship between himself and us. Though already stated once in v. 4, he now makes clear that branches do not bear fruit apart from the vine. He also says it explicitly, "...apart from me you can do nothing" (v. 5) and "[he/she] dries up." (v. 6)

There are some other intriguing details in this middle section. There is the frightening imagery of being "thrown away... and cast into the fire" (v. 6) – that is not describing a capricious God, but the results of rejecting Christ and his Word.

On what seems like the other extreme is the promise of “ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” (v. 7) But again, this is not a capricious genie-God, granting wishes to the faithful; rather, it is the natural blessing of living in God’s will. Leading up to Easter, we looked at how rooted Jesus was in God’s Word and seeking God’s will. That is the same thing being described here in the first part of v. 7: “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you... THEN ask... and it will be done.” What do you ask for with that kind of abiding in Christ and His Word? You ask for God’s will to be done!

And Jesus goes on to say that his Father is glorified by THIS – living in Christ, living in God’s Word, bearing the fruit of righteousness because of that CONNECTION. That is not only what proves or shows us to be his disciples, but is what brings God honor. (v. 8)

That is the real work of the Christian, the real work of the Church: this is, in the broadest sense, what worship means. It is not salvation – that is Christ’s work. Our work is honoring God, glorifying God, worshiping God, serving God – and Jesus has told us we do that through loving God and loving others.

REAL FRUIT: Love and Joy (vv. 9-11)

Starting in v. 9, Jesus drops the vine and branch imagery completely and speaks directly, leading to the listing of two more “fruits” we bear: “Just as the Father has loved me, I have also loved you.” He also makes a link between obeying God’s Word – that’s the “commandments” – and “abiding in his love.” Abide means stay, remain, live; it’s where we make our home. That’s how we are to relate to Jesus; he is our home! To trust Christ and His Word is to obey and follow Christ and to experience God’s love through that. It’s all of one piece.

And love is not the only tangible fruit; look at v. 11! He is teaching us this to know God’s love, but also so that his “joy may be in you, and that your joy may be made full.” As we trust, follow, obey, and live with Jesus, we not only know true joy, but that joy grows and grows in us. It is “made full.”

To return ourselves to the image for a moment, it is Christ who connects us as branches to the loving purpose of the Father vine-dresser. We can't manufacture our own fruit – cleanness, obedience, love, or joy – but only truly know those things through our connection with Christ.

Well-Planted, Bearing Fruit

So let me try to say all that more simply and directly...

God's purpose for us is to know and share his love and joy – that honors God and blesses others. We cannot truly do any of that apart from Jesus Christ. So Christ has come to make us clean, make a way, invite us, and connect us to God's purpose.

So the secret is not in output. Out between the church building and the lower lot, we have a community garden. Those who are a part of it aren't just piling produce up in the garden boxes; that would dry up and die. The secret is planting well, cultivating healthy plants, and bearing and enjoying the fruit (or veggies) that result.

This is a timely word for us. This image at the center of Jesus' teaching today reminds us that we will only fulfill our earthly purpose through connection with Christ and obedience to His Word. As we continue to follow Christ together, submitting to God's Word and will, we will bear the fruit that God has designed for us and desires from us. That connection to Christ is what compels us out into the world in love and sustains us in joy, even in the difficulties of our lives and this world.

We have been well-planted in Christ; God meets us regularly to cultivate us through His Word and His Spirit. As we listen and respond to that Word and Spirit, we will continue to be a community that honors God and we will bless each other and the world around us with the fruit we bear. Amen!