

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.” (John 15:1-8)

Branches Bear Fruit

I thought about doing a field trip during church this morning. We could all go over to the back yard of the parsonage and look at my wife’s grapevine. Of course, it doesn’t even have leaves on it, yet. But I could use it as a visual aid, because Jesus talks about grapevines in our gospel lesson for today. Obviously, there are no grapes on my wife’s grapevine yet. I hope that sometime in September, we’ll get to bring in a basket full of nice, red grapes. By late June, already, you should be able to see little clusters of green grapes growing, gradually getting bigger and bigger. Jesus was familiar with that process. He lived in a country that was full of grapevines so when he said the words in our text for today, he knew he was talking about something his disciples saw every year. The truth is, he could’ve used any kind of fruit tree. The point would still be the same: **branches bear fruit.**

I.

I wish we could go over and see that grapevine behind my house. It didn’t start there. It started in Muskegon over a decade ago. When my children were little, for Mother’s Day, we often bought my wife something for her garden. One year, one of my sons saw that grapevine for sale. It was just a little stick poking out of a little plastic container. He asked, “Can we get a grapevine for mom?” So we bought it and gave it to her for Mother’s Day. She planted it next to the parsonage. Well, a year or two after we planted it, I got the call to come here to Peace. When we were packing up the truck, my son came to me and said, “Dad, we’re taking mom’s grapevine, aren’t we?” And I said, “Oh, yes.” And I went and found a five gallon pail and a shovel and dug it up and brought it here to Livonia. Well, the first year we were here, we lived in the teacherage. So I planted it out next to the garage and it continued to grow. But then a year later, we moved into the parsonage. Again, when we were moving, my son came to me and said, “Dad, we’re taking mom’s grapevine, aren’t we?” Again, I said, “Oh yes,” and went and found a pail and shovel and moved it over there and planted it next to the garage. And it died. That was too many moves too close together. There was just a dead, brown stick standing in our back yard. Then winter came. And spring. And one day, I looked at that dead stick which was still standing in my back yard, and next to it, there was a little spout. That sprout became the grapevine that you can see in my back yard today.

Why did that grapevine live? Because the life is not in the branches. It’s in the roots. If you cut a branch off a grapevine, it will turn brown and dry up. But if you leave it connected to the vine and through the vine to the roots, it will live. And it will bear fruit. That is Jesus’ first point this morning: **branches bear fruit because they’re connected to the vine.**

Jesus was talking to his disciples on the night he was betrayed. They had already left the upper room where they ate the last supper. They were on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would pray and they would sleep. And then, Judas would come and arrest Jesus and they would all run away. Then Peter would deny Jesus three times, and the next day, as far as we can tell, ten of them would hide while Jesus died. Jesus knew all that was about to happen. John records the last conversation Jesus had with them as he prepared to die – four chapters of Jesus summarizing the most important lessons he had spent the last three years teaching them. And this text is part of that final lecture.

What did it mean? Jesus said, **“I am the vine, you are the branches.”** That’s what we’re talking about. He said, **“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do**

nothing.” So he’s talking about us and how we bear fruit. Now what is our fruit? Our lives of faith. In its simplest form, fruits of faith are the good works we do because we know Jesus. They include the obvious “church” stuff, like bringing an offering and dragging ourselves out of bed on Sunday morning so we can get here. But there’s more to it than that. Fruits of faith are all the changes God makes in our lives because God has made us new. Now most of the changes are the things that we teach our kids in the Ten Commandments: obeying authorities, being faithful to our spouses, raising our kids to know the Lord, respecting other people’s body and life, respecting other people’s property, being truthful and using our words to build people up rather than tear them down. Now, none of that is terribly different from what unbelievers do to be good friends and good neighbors. But we do more of them than we probably would’ve done if we were unbelievers. And because God has made us new, for us, there’s always a component of faith in those works of love and service.

There is a part of our fruits of faith that is unique to being a Christian. It begins with honoring the Lord as the only God and hearing his word. But it extends to rejoicing in the Lord even in suffering. It includes valuing the things that God values and putting his word ahead of the thoughts and opinions of our society – or even of our own family members. Fruits of faith include finding comfort in God’s love when life hurts. They include the happiness we feel on the day our children are confirmed. They include the strength God gives us to confess him and to live for him in a sinful world.

All those things are ours only if we remain connected to Jesus. We are the branches. He is the vine that transmits water and nutrients to us so that keep us alive. Jesus’ point is that there is only one way to bring forth real fruits of faith: by feeding our faith. We feed our faith with the gospel. That’s why we get up on Sunday morning and come here. Jesus assumes that we – like the disciples – are already bearing fruit because we are already believers. But Jesus recognizes that there are lots of distractions out there. There are lots of people with ideas for how we can raise more money in the church or how we can make our kids behave themselves better. There are lots of people out there with funny ideas about what kinds of fruits God wants to see – they hold up a lot of sin as something that’s just good fun.

You know what? It’s really easy for us to start to think that there has to be a better way to grow in our faith than coming here on Sunday and singing hymns we don’t really like all that much and listening to that guy up front tell us the same old story, again and again. We start to think that catchier music or more audio visuals will motivate people better. We start to think we need to tell more stories and teach less doctrine. We start to think that what’s wrong with our church is that we don’t have enough fellowship activities and that’s why people don’t stay. While we do have a need to bring the gospel to people in a way that they can understand it and relate to it, and we do want to foster our love for each other in the congregation, in the end, only one thing brings forth fruits of faith: the gospel, the power of God, the connection to Jesus.

Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. We’re like that dead stick standing in my back yard. But our sinful nature thinks it’s smarter than Jesus is. But Jesus died because the sinner inside us doesn’t believe the gospel can change us or make our congregation grow. He died because we get bored with the same old message and because our pastor isn’t creative enough to find new ways to apply that message to us personally. Jesus died because it’s so easy for us to disconnect from the vine and put our roots down into talk radio or internet sites or our college teachers. He died and paid for all those ways we replace him with something else. He rose to forgive us for all that sin. He rose to tell us that God doesn’t see our failures anymore. Every time he tells us that, he reconnects us to him. And he pumps spiritual life into us. That life leads to fruits of faith.

II.

All we can do to grow our faith is hook up to the gospel. But God works to keep away things that get in the way of that gospel. He prunes us branches. Why do farmers prune grapevines? It focuses the vine’s energy and nutrients so that you have more and better fruit. An unpruned vine will have many more branches, but fewer and smaller grapes. So a skilled pruner is actually pretty aggressive about it. That’s the picture Jesus uses: **branches bear fruit because the farmer prunes them.**

Pruning is cutting shoots and even branches off of the vine. You’re supposed to cut away as much of the old wood as possible, because the grapes actually grow only on new wood. God cuts away old, dead branches in us that don’t produce fruit. God cuts away new shoots so that there are only so many. Why do that? Because we sinners have limitations. We only have so much spiritual and physical and emotional energy. God focuses it. So he cuts away distractions. He cuts away competition for our spiritual life. Sometimes, that means that he cuts away things that would lead us into sin.

But sometimes, it means that he cuts away things that aren't evil or even bad, but that in your life or my life would compete with our growing in the faith. What do I mean? For example, for many years, I've wanted to buy my own house. But God has never put us in the position to do that. As frustrating as I find that, I have to conclude that up to this point, it would've been bad for my faith or for my families' faith if we had had to deal with the responsibility and distractions of owning a home. That might not be true for you, but so far, God has pruned that opportunity for me. Sometimes, God closes doors. Why do some kids get to go away to college and others have to live at home? Why do some people get offered specific jobs while other people don't? We can't see all that God is doing and he does give us freedom to choose. He rarely eliminates every distraction or temptation. But he manages our lives to produce the strongest and most productive faith we can have here. So he prunes some things away.

To me, cutting away branches sounds like it must hurt. If my wife's grapevine could talk, what would it say when I prune it? Farmers take sharp tools and cut those shoots and branches away. And God sometimes takes a sharp tool to our lives, too. Pruning hurts. Pruning can include all the bumps and bruises of this life, all the hurts and sorrows that we have to endure, over and over again. And Jesus promises that it is all so that we have the richest spiritual life possible.

What it would be like if God made you prune your own life? What if we had to decide what doors to close and which hurts to face? My guess is that we would never want to cut anything off because it would hurt too much, or we'd cut so much off that we damaged our faith. So we need someone else to do it. But it's not me that you need. I do try to prune that grapevine in our back yard. But I haven't got a clue what I'm supposed to be doing. The truth is, I'm a little afraid when I prune. I don't want to damage the vine. It almost died on us once.

When it comes to pruning your life, you don't have to worry about me bumbling around, causing unnecessary pain and doing real damage. You have the master gardener at work. God the Father, who loved you so much that he sent Jesus to die and pay for all your sins, to rescue you from death and hell – he is the one who is pruning you. He will always cut in love. God the Father who had the power to rip open death itself and free Jesus from the tomb is working in your life. He has all power to make every cut work for your good. God who knew your name before the world began decides which shoots to cut and which ones to keep. He wants you to bring forth rich and varied spiritual fruit.

So we aren't going to do a field trip this morning because that grapevine in my back yard, even when it's covered with fruit, is at best an object lesson. We have a deeper truth to explore. We branches will bring forth fruits. Because we are connected to the vine, to Christ. And because God prunes our lives, with love and skill. Trust him. Amen.