

SUSTAINING BRANCHES

The Rev. Geoff Parker to Foreside Community Church - Falmouth, ME

Saturday, October 19, 2019

Scripture: [John 15:1–8](#)

INTRODUCTION TO THE SCRIPTURE

We're continuing in our fall theme, *Growing Together* today... listening for the ways in which our ancestors and scripture have used the language of growth in nature as a pattern for the growth and nurture of the Christian Community.

I'm working from the ground up. Last week, we talked about the ways in which our roots sustain and give life to us... and we also talked a little about what happens when we get are roots crowded up and tangled, and why we might want the full richness of our history... the full width of our Spiritual roots system, so to speak... to help us stand up against... well, I don't know, maybe a giant October Nor'Easter? ^[1]

Today, Jesus is talking about branches and vines. He's speaking to his disciples on his last night with them, in what is sometimes called his "farewell discourse," an extended teaching and prayer for them. In this section, he invites them to be one with him, to connect to what gives life in his teaching, in his ministry... but maybe also in his very being as the incarnate one.

So listen for how we might grow together in these words of scripture.

SERMON

This entire sermon series started from a vine, really. A thing, which, honestly, didn't belong in my yard, yet one day I looked out and this very delicate vine had wrapped itself around my birdfeeder, and was climbing to the sky. And it made me think of this scripture of Jesus's inviting us to be a part of a vine of life with him. The Apostle Paul would later say that we are grafted on... but Jesus himself just says that we are one and the same, branches from him, grown by God.

Vines are kind of amazing, they grow and stretch, sometimes passing life over amazing distances... sometimes they go far, sometimes they grow high. This one day, looking out at my yard, I couldn't help but think of two things... of the delicate and essential ways in which each part had to be connected, one to the other to sustain life... and the way in which they had **focused** their growth, and found a way to climb, to rest one branch upon the other to reach for the light.

Jesus invites his disciples to abide in him as branches of a vine... that invitation is to be connected and sustained by his teaching and relationship with him, **AND** to be one with to all that is through his incarnation and life.

It's a little maddening for me that in many circles of Christian talking and thinking, we have tended to make Jesus small, and ourselves large.

What I mean by Jesus as small, is that we have been content to focus on our own individual relationship with Jesus, but not trust God the vine-grower to care to ask us to mind the health of the whole plant of which we are a part.

What makes the gathered saints in any church... (You know you're the saints of this church, right?) powerful is not just that each one of us might have a relationship with Jesus in our lives. What makes church powerful is that we have a relationship with *each other* and through that we know more and more deeply about our relationship with the Holy.

This is, as a wise colleague once said, "just that easy, just that hard."

Just that easy... the word that Jesus uses here, "abide." It works, right? There's nothing a branch needs to do to earn life from the vine, right? If anything, it just needs to be one. It just needs to stay connected. To have a relationship like the one Jesus invites us to today we simply need to

How often do we find ourselves over performing, over examining, over producing our friendships and relationships? Do we truly get time to abide with one another? How might we do that?

I give thanks for the gifts of this community, of the chance to worship, to sing, to pray... sometimes to knit, to serve, to play together here. I know of the incredible friendships that are here... I hope that we are invited here to build relationship and each other based simply on our belovedness... so we are connected to our own belovedness in Jesus.

This doesn't mean some sort of sappy everyone is best friends and we're all soul mates and all think as one here kind of thing. It means precisely the opposite: we are different, and wild, each of us probably in some way perfectly enraging, and we think in incredibly diverse ways, **and we are still one**. And we are called to live as one. Abiding with one another just as we abide in Jesus.

Even more, that one-ness is not without consequence. The reality of Christ's incarnation and connection to our lives is as simple... but it also demands our wrestling with the complexity and web of life, of brokenness, of systemic sin or injustice that ensnares and oppresses others as much as us. What is the ethic and justice we are called to as we live more deeply into the reality that we are one, connected to all life? Because that is what Jesus is calling us to "connect with."

Pruning

We make Jesus small sometimes... What I mean by making ourselves large is that when we encounter passages of Jesus or John the Baptist, engaging this question of pruning or of purifying... we have tended to think that God's judgment works on the "per human" basis: some of us are deadwood and are headed for the fire, and some of will be happily watered and grow in all the right ways.

Rather, what I think is lifted up today is this: all the vine needs tending, all of it will sometimes have growth that is not sustainable or healthy, all of us will need a little pruning to get to that which gives us life, and lets us bear fruit.

None of that feels fun. And I don't know about you, but I am always building a bigger fire to throw my whole self on... but that's not how any of this works, right? How much better to understand that there will be things in my life that have to fall away for me to be my whole self? For me to be even more deeply connected?

How much more might we—and everyone else—understand God's grace if we got over debating **who** was headed for a fire, and celebrated the way in which beloved relationship and community often invites us to remember our life-giving connections, and prune our own sense of self to what is truly life-giving: for us, and for others.

It may just be that what we most need to prune back is our activity, our performance, our productivity. It may be we need to refocus ourselves on simply being—abiding—with one another, and with God. What things might you be able to cut away to even more deeply connect with one another?

It's important to note in all this imagery, abiding, pruning and connection do lead us to bear fruit... but fruit is not for the vine... it's for creating new life for others! We are, thanks be to God, sustained here as a people and as individuals by the Spirit and relationships we enjoy here... but, we are sustained here partly so we can bear fruit for others in our community and in the world.

May we bear that fruit which gives witness to the glory of God who tends the vine and branches of our lives here and everywhere. May we abide more fully in the love of Jesus which invites us to simply abide in love and relationship, and may we be challenged to commit more fully our lives and our witness to show that love. Amen.

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1. Some of Maine is still without power from the October storm which has knocked out power to almost 200,000 people in the state. ↩