

SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

5th Sunday of Lent

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Text: John 15:1-11

Title: “The God We Can Know: Knowing God’s Power”

After I graduated from seminary, our family moved to Caro, MI where I would serve as pastor of Sutton Sunshine and Bethel UMCs. The parsonage was planted on the corner of two country roads right next to the Sutton Sunshine church, cornfields all around. We were in the middle of farm country. Because we arrived in June that first year it was too late to plant a garden but the next spring one of the farmers in the congregation --when he learned that we were interested in a garden—came with his tractor and plowed up a nice space in a lot next to the parsonage. It was about 30 feet by 40 feet, I’d say. And then he brought back a load of cow manure from the dairy farm in a manure spreader and shot that natural fertilizer all over that newly plowed ground. It was then nicely tilled into the dirt.

A few weeks later we were planting: tomatoes, zucchini, pumpkins, onions, cucumbers, beans, corn, carrots. You name it, it seemed we had it in that garden. And it grew beyond my expectations. It wasn’t long before we realized that one zucchini plant was enough. We didn’t need four. The tomatoes, cucumber and bean plants produced so much that we found ourselves in the kitchen into the wee hours of the morning canning because we didn’t want anything to go to waste. It was our first garden. We were young and naïve but the abundance we enjoyed was amazing, all because of the gifts of the ground and the knowledgeable gifts of people who knew about how to grow things. It grew well beyond our expectations. In fact it grew so well that our first garden was also our last garden. Now we visit the farmers market. It’s much less work and supports those who grow for a living.

Thinking of Jesus as the vine brought back this experience of growing things out of the gifts of God: the ground, the fertilizer, the seed, the knowledge of others and the gifts they provided. Part of what made it such a great thing was that we didn’t do it alone. Other people were involved, the gifts of creation were involved. None of it came about as a result of working alone with our own resources. The gift of abundance really was a gift. We were not alone.

Reminds me of a story: a friend rode with a farmer upon his horse-drawn wagon. There were blinders on the horse, and as they rode along, the friend noticed the farmer shouting out, “Now, keep pulling, Cinnamon... That’s the way, Gertrude... A little harder, Dakota...” Finally, the friend asked, “Why do you keep calling all these different names when there’s just one horse?” The farmer replied, “So my horse will think there are others pulling too. If he thinks he’s alone, he’ll quit!”

Have you ever been there? Feeling alone. Ready to quit because it seems you’re doing

it—whatever “it” might be—all alone with no help, no support, no resources but your own? Or maybe it’s just feeling lonely that visits you now and again, as if you really are on your own and there is no one to help or with whom share your life situation.

The biblical witness has something to say to us when such feelings arise. In fact, in the Gospel According to John, the passage from this morning is part of what scholars call the “Farewell Discourse” in which Jesus is preparing his disciples for his own death. They are about to feel alone, that life-scrambling feeling when you lose someone or life changes in some dramatic way and the spiritual, emotional, psychological equilibrium once felt is turned upside down. The disciples were about to enter that experience of wondering what the future brings now that they lost the One they loved and who loved them.

Jesus, then, uses this image of the vine. It’s not an image that’s pulled out of the blue. The image of the grapevine was part of the religious heritage of the Jews.

“We were like a grapevine,” says the Psalmist (Psalm 80.8).

“Israel is the vineyard,” declares the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 5.1-7).

And again and again Ezekiel speaks of Israel by the symbol of the vine (Ezekiel 15.1-6 and 19.10-14). The vine had become the symbol for the nation. It was used to decorate the temple and used on coins. The curious thing is that every reference in the First Testament to Israel being a vine is negative. The nation is described as a “rotten and worthless vine” (Jeremiah 2.21) and an “empty vine” (Hosea 10.1).

So this saying of Jesus in John’s Gospel, “I am the *true* vine” sets Jesus in stark contrast to a nation that has fallen short of what it was intended to be. Jesus is “the true (real and genuine) vine.” He is the real deal! God’s new vine is Jesus. It is in having a relationship with him that we can be connected to the life of God.

“I am the vine. You are the branches.”

The grapevines in our worship display this morning are here because Betty Stark who is a member of our worship team has a friend with some grapevines. Betty was visiting this friend and happened to mention she was looking for some vines for a visual display for worship. Her friend lit up with excitement and offered to give her some vines. So they went out together and cut the vines you see this morning. The only hitch was that once they were cut, her friend said, it wouldn’t take long before they would begin to dry out, so they needed to be placed in the sanctuary as soon as possible or they would simply stay wound up in the shape necessary to get them in Betty’s car.

It fits, doesn’t it, with Jesus’ instruction to the disciples?

4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.
5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.

Remember Jesus is talking to a community here. It's not an individual to whom Jesus is speaking in this Gospel account. It's a group of people--his disciples--to whom he is speaking. When Jesus says "you" it's the 2nd person plural. In effect what this means is that Jesus is saying

"Abide in me as I abide in all of you together. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless all of you together abide in me. I am the vine, all of you together are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me all of you together can do nothing."

Being connected to the vine of Jesus means being connected to all the other branches, too. It's not just about me. It's not just about you. It's about all of us together as we receive life from the Source. Without the gifts from the Source there is no fruit just as there is no garden produce without the first gifts of ground and seed and rain. God is the Initiator, the first Giver from whom we receive life. How we choose to live our lives determines what fruit we bear.

One of the routine chores of those who grow grapes for a living is the pruning of the vines. Every year viticulturists take to the vineyard to tend the vines and cut away 90% of the growth in order to give the plants a new start. Then again in the summer they prune away those shoots that are non-productive because, if left to themselves, grapevines will produce all kinds of foliage but the fruit production is dramatically reduced. To get the best fruit, pruning has to be involved.

Pruning is a metaphor within this metaphor of Jesus as the vine to point out that sometimes there are things in our own lives that need to be cut away, left behind, let go. It raises the question, "What in my life do I need to examine and get rid of that is not helpful in producing the kind of fruit God intends in my life?" Maybe it's a tendency to hold onto old grievances that keeps anger just under the surface. Maybe it's a tendency to want what my neighbor has—covetousness. Maybe it's a previous hurt that just doesn't heal.

There's a story in the book the small groups are using for this study that captures the need for pruning. It's a story told by Mike Yaconelli, who was a youth ministry guru from whom I learned when I was doing youth ministry full-time. It's the story of a woman named Margaret who lived some 40 years trying to overcome the pain of an experience she'd had in school as a little girl. A demanding and difficult teacher, Ms. Garner, was someone with whom she clashed.

One day Ms. Garner was pushed beyond tolerance when Margaret was late to class and Ms. Garner decided to teach her a lesson. She had each student come to the chalk board and write something negative about Margaret. And so they did:

"Margaret is stupid!"

"Margaret is selfish."

"Margaret is a dummy."

"Margaret is fat."

The pain of that experience left scars all her life. She had tried and was trying still to rid herself of the wounds she suffered that day. She tired therapy—two years of weekly sessions,

trying to deal with the anxiety and depression the experience led to in her life. In the last session with her counselor, she was asked to recount again the 25 children and the things each had written about her. Recounting the experience again took her back to the pain and raised tears, but when she was finished recalling each student and each remark and the tears had ceased, the counselor told her she had forgotten one person. Margaret was certain that wasn't the case. She rehearsed this throughout her life. She remembered each student and each cutting remark, but the counselor insisted that she had forgotten someone.

No, Margaret. You did forget someone. See, he's sitting in the back of the classroom. He's standing up, walking toward your teacher, Ms. Garner. She is handing him a piece of chalk and he's taking it, Margaret, he's taking it! Now he's walking over to the black board and picking up an eraser. He is erasing every one of the sentences the students wrote. They are gone! Margaret, they are gone! Now he's turning and looking at you, Margaret. Do you recognize him yet? Yes, his name is Jesus. Look, he's writing new sentences on the board.

'Margaret is loved.
'Margaret is beautiful.
'Margaret is gentle and kind.
'Margaret is strong.
'Margaret has great courage.

And Margaret began to weep. But very quirkily, the weeping turned into a smile, and then into laughter, and then into tears of joy. (pp. 79-80, The God We Can Know).

Maybe you don't have this kind of experience that needs to be resolved in order to receive the gift of Christ's love for you. Maybe it's something else that needs to be examined in your life and mine. What are some ways in which you might need to prune or cut away in order to produce more fruit, healthier fruit? And why this is so hard? What makes us resist cutting away too much activity or finally letting go of something that has no promise of producing? How much of our self-identity or feelings of importance get in the way? How much does insecurity play a part? As you see yourself as a branch between Jesus, the Source, and the fruit—the results of being connected to Christ—which way do you look for strength?

The gift in all of this is that there is always hope for us when we allow Christ to be the vine and recognize that we are not alone. We don't have to save the world on our own. Christ has already done that. Our part is staying connected to the vine and knowing the source of our strength. It's like any loving relationships. Love grows by staying in relationship with the One--and the ones--we love. And that affects everything else that we do.