

Glen Ridge Congregational Church, May 10, 2009
John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

There's an old story about a gardener who had been very careful to select the best cucumber seeds. He planted each of them at their proper depth. He fertilized and watered the small plants faithfully. He worked the soil to prevent weeds from encroaching and he sprayed to keep the bugs and blights from hurting the young plants.

It seemed to be a wonderful season for cucumbers – just the right amount of rain and sunshine. And broad green leaves and then blossoms appeared on the vines.

One day he noticed that here and there some of the leaves were dying; blooms were fading. Most of the leaves remained that healthy glossy green, but amid them were those turning brown. Why, he wondered, would some die in the midst of all the living? He looked closer.

Stepping carefully among the tangled mass of vines he traced the ones on which the leaves and blooms were dying and found that they were all connected to a single stem. There, just above the ground, cut-worms had severed the stalk. The entire vine above that point was dying because it was no longer attached to the roots and to the stem that had produced it.

What a good image that is for us as we make our faith journey both as individuals and together. We need to be reminded of our connectedness to God first as we make our way through the joys and sorrows of life. But also we need to be reminded of our connectedness to others.

We so easily get distracted by our busy-ness, by our routines, don't we – not a lot different from the fact that we almost always sit in the very same pew here. When things are going well we get caught up in all kinds of "stuff", in the day-to-day – we don't think about grounding ourselves. Somehow, though, we eventually get overwhelmed – we have such trouble balancing work and family and all our responsibilities. When we try to go to sleep our minds won't shut down. We replay events of the days – even events of a distant past over and over again in our minds. Could it be that somehow, slowly, we've come to think everything depends on us? We resist outside help. We neglect the power source of our very lives. We lose our grounding, our connectedness to the vine – our very source of life and love.

Jesus said, "I am the vine. You are the branches. Cut off from me you can do nothing. Abide in my love." Abide in my love. Let my love and strength nurture you, wash over you, hold you up." Abide - isn't that a great word?

When I get overwhelmed by my own busyness, my own worries, my own frustrations and fears, the only thing I can do is pray, "I can't do this God – you have to." I have to connect, to reconnect to that incredibly strong vine and ground myself in God's presence – and God has never let me down. When we can truly confess that God is in charge, not us, it's so liberating! Seems contradictory, doesn't it. But it's not. When we move aside and let God be God and let ourselves be God's children – we are deeply connected to the source of all life. A life that's full and rich and joyful, no matter the circumstances on any given day.

I know there are some of you listening to this beginning the “yes but” thoughts – I call them the yabuts...you all know what I mean. I think we all forget at one time or another that the promise of the good news is not that we will always feel happy, secure, joyful, fulfilled – that we’ll never have real problems, sorrows, tragedy in our lives. No, that’s not the good news. The good news is that we’ll never be alone. That God is always with us. That’s the promise.

It would be easy to skip over the harder parts of this verse – but we can face them - knowing we’re supported and nurtured by that awesome good news. The hard parts here: branches that bear no fruit are cut off. And even the branches that do bear fruit are pruned to be even more fruitful.

So, if we’re the branches, do we allow ourselves to be shaped, trained, sometimes pruned, sometimes stretched to a new position? These decisions make all the difference in the amount of fruit we have to share. That pruning process can be painful though, can’t it.

A few years ago one of the confirmation classes in Middlebury gave me a butterfly bush. It did reasonably well the first year. The second year of growth it just exploded and grew to well over 6 feet tall – the butterflies were spectacular all that summer. The bush was beautiful – that winter as it sat in the garden, barren, sad looking – I certainly hoped it would grow as beautifully again the next year. I looked it up in one of my gardening books and found that in the spring I really had to cut it back – back to about 8-12” tall. Oh, that was painful – to cut back this bush to almost nothing. But I did it – about this time of year actually. Then I watched it every day as the weather warmed, hoping to see some signs of life, positive that I’d killed it. Sure enough, the leaves sprouted, the bush grew again to over 6 feet tall, and I had another summer of enjoyment watching the butterflies, the birds, especially the hummingbirds, and the lovely purple flowers. But that cutting back hurt. How many of you have had that same experience in your gardens? But I learned, as have many of you, that the pruning was essential to the health of the plant and that the pain was more than worth it.

Pruning is essential to growing, to productive lives, to bearing fruit. But we sure don’t like it much when we experience a “pruning” in our own lives, do we. Those painful times are when we sometimes hear people questioning God, blaming God, denying that God is with them – asking how can God do this to me? I don’t think honestly that God brings these times of suffering, these times of pruning upon us – I believe firmly that Christ stands grieving with us when we are being pruned for greater growth – I know Christ stands with us at all times. And I do believe that our gospel tells us that following Jesus entails cost. And that cost may be painful. Too often I think American popular religion presents Christianity as the best deal a person can get, a way to solve all of our problems, a technique to get what we want.

No – discipleship means getting what God wants. And sometimes, what God wants in and for our world cannot be achieved without cost and sometimes that cost is painful. But, we’re part of the vine – and that’s a wonderful thing.

There was a woman who thought she was going to complete college and go on to law school. That was her dream from childhood. But she felt called during her senior year of college to go into elementary teaching. While she was doing volunteer tutoring, she discovered that she had real gifts for teaching children.

After her first 10 years of teaching she said, “You know, when I decided against a more lucrative career and went into teaching, I thought of all the things I was having to give up – mainly things associated with money. It was a sacrifice. It was painful, like almost any sacrifice. But after a decade of teaching, I realize that the cost was worth it, the pain was worth it. I have a good life. Not the life I thought I wanted, but the life I now know that I needed. The life I know God was calling me to.”

What is the life to which God calls you? What is the life to which God calls this congregation? What fruit are we to produce?

The lesson from 1 John makes it clear that the fruit of ministry is love. That’s the purpose of the branches - to produce the fruit of God’s love. The simple truth is that we abide in Christ when we produce the fruit of ministry – love for one another. And this love grows by the power of God. We love because God first loved us. Will we allow God’s power to produce the fruit of love in our lives?

Let’s go back to that cucumber vine in the story: remember how the plant was described as a tangled mass of vines? How the gardener had to sift through this mess to find those branches that were dying?

Maybe that’s a reasonably good image of the church, of the community of believers. A mass of tangled branches of the vine. The vine produces lots of branches and those branches have to intertwine and support each other if fruit is to be produced. “I am the vine, you are the branches,” says Jesus. It’s plural – branches. We abide in Christ and Christ in us as we commit to one another as branches of Christ’s vine. We can’t reject other branches and assume we can be faithful alone. We can’t – at least not for any length of time. Nor is it our role to judge whether another branch is fruitful or not. God does the pruning, not us.

All the branches must intertwine with each other – we must support each other – no judgment, no rejection – we must help each other produce the fruit of God’s love.

Last Thursday I went over to Bethel Love church with the food from the grocery cart and a very generous cash donation one of our congregation made to their ministry – in the kitchen the women and I talked about their mission conference – they were all still inspired by that conference and the speakers they’d heard and were wondering – how can we do more. Our kids come with us each week to the soup kitchen and help pack food for the distribution but they don’t see that what they’re doing is mission outreach – it’s too familiar to them. Yes, these women and even the kids know that what they do is important but one of them said, maybe they need to go somewhere else to do it and really understand better. We talked about this for a while – maybe, we thought, they could come here and do some service project – just like our people go to serve there, they could come and serve here. We’ll explore that in the days and weeks to come – we were all excited about the prospect of getting together, especially those kids who were there working, setting the tables and putting out the salad dressings for the dinner.

We need to step into each others’ world to understand better that we are all connected to the same vine – we are all branches of the same vine.

We are all called to support each other, to intertwine with each other, to love each other.

The love of God in Jesus Christ abides with us and it will produce the fruit of ministry even when all the forces around us resist it. Will we accept such power for our lives? Will we allow ourselves to abide in the love of Christ and trust the divine presence

to produce awesome results? Will we renew our commitment to be linked always, intertwined, with sisters and brothers of faith? Will we allow the full life force of God in Christ to work in us and produce the power of divine love?

I am the vine and my father is the grower, proclaims Jesus. He charges us, “abide in me as I abide in you.”

So may it be for each of us to the glory of God! Amen.

Let us pray:

Gracious and loving God, you plant and tend your whole creation. We praise you this day for things that grow: for the earth coming to life again in spring, for children, for relationships of love that deepen over the years. We thank you especially for Jesus, the vine who feeds us, who holds us together, who is our life.

Holy one, we would pray for other branches of Christ’s vine, for Christians around the world, especially those who suffer for their faith. We pray for other churches, that together we may witness to your love, that the diversity of voices may not distract from your grace, but witness to it. We pray for those who are cut off, who wither from lack of food, who have no shelter from the storm. Feed them, O God, and strengthen us to share our food our shelter, our security with them. Help each one of us to connect to your vine, to abide with you, and to live in love. We pray all this in the name of your Son, our Redeemer, Jesus Christ. Amen.