

## Plant Food©

John 15:1-8

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***'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.***  
**– John 15:1-8 (NRSV)**

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Once upon a time, the Gates yard (wherever we lived) always looked well groomed, with lots of beautiful flowers and shrubs. The gardener loved them all, enjoyed the toil of working the ground and planting and pulling up weeds and pruning off the wild branches, picking off the dead heads of the flowers.

Me – I did a little to help and I certainly enjoyed seeing them, but Fred – he was the master gardener.

These days, we have a few plants in our house. The gardener in our family – the one that is not me – feeds this plant food to our plants. He puts a little of this Miracle Grow into the water and pours it into the soil. I guess the plants really like this plant food, because, for Fred anyway, they do really well.

Jesus uses this gardener language in the text today. "I am the vine, you are the branches, the Father is the vine grower – the gardener."

Since I'm not the best gardener in the world, I found I was struggling a bit with putting all these things Jesus was saying into language that might help us understand what it means for us today – as individual disciples and as the church community. So, I went to a source – someone who can tell me more about vines and branches than I could possibly know; someone who understands flowers and plants and has had lots of experience with them. I went to Laura Parker, of course! I'm aware that there are a number of gardeners here among us so I always have a great library of resources and knowledge!

I found out that the gardener has to have a lot of knowledge about raising grape vines. He must know the vine really well before pruning the branches, or the vine will get cut off and a large part of the branches will die. But, if the vine were cut – it too would die and there would be nothing left.

I found out that pruning is a very important part of growing strong, healthy vines that produce grapes – that if they weren't pruned, they would grow – but they be wild and unmanageable, weak and unruly.

I learned that branches grow and then branch out even more – those are called lateral branches. And they spread so thick it's difficult sometimes to tell one from another. They curl around and they all find some structure to take hold of and to cling to.

I was also told an interesting fact about grape vines: the trunk of the vine is much stronger when it has lots and lots of healthy, fruitful branches. The vine draws air, and oxygen and nourishment from the branches and then it gives it out again even more to the branches. "Abide in me, and I abide in you," Jesus said.

Of course, if a branch gets cut off from the vine – it's main source - its plant food, if you will – it can't live. It will wither. It certainly can't produce fruit.

Sometimes, there are branches that are not producing any fruit yet they are taking away nourishment from the other branches. Those branches have to be cut off so the others can live and be healthy.

And Jesus said: I am the vine, you are the branches, those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing.

Eugene Peterson, in his translation of the Bible – The Message – uses the word "live" for "abide." "Live in me, and I live in you." Jesus is saying, "Stay connected to me. Cling to me. Let me be your nourishment, your food, your drink, your lifeline."

It seems fairly easy to understand – doesn't it? God is the one who has planted, has created us; the one who oversees and loves and prunes. God knows the Vine – Jesus – completely; God loves the Vine – Jesus, the Son with a deep, abiding, live in me kind of love that pours into Jesus and then out to us. God gives air and breath and water and sunshine and warmth and all the things that are needed to promote healthy growth.

Jesus, the Vine, draws his life and love from God, the Gardener and then feeds it out to the branches. The branches, of course, are us – each one of us. And, as long as we stay connected to Jesus, we have life and health and growth. Apart from him, we have nothing.

Do you believe that is true? Apart from Jesus, you have nothing? Well, you might lots of things, you might family, and money and a home and job and – you do have something, of course.

But, here is the thing that Jesus says is important. Here is the main thing, the top priority. He says “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.” It is fruit bearing that is important and it is fruit that we bear if we are connected to him, but that we won’t have without him. It is the lack of fruit that is the nothing he is talking about if we are separated from him.

So, obviously, being a disciple of Jesus’ – a person who has committed to learning and following and obeying Jesus – is, naturally, expected to bear fruit. It is our fruits that reveal how close we are to the vine. When we love Christ and have his love in us, we naturally produce more of that love.

Love is the fruit that Christians should be showing in all we do – in every aspect of the life of a follower. To love, as Jesus loved us, is the command and it is the fruit he wants to see us produce.

But I think there is a more important factor here than just the single disciple. This vine and branch analogy is so community oriented. If the branches on the vine grow so thick and out so laterally that it is hard to identify one from another, then I think it is very indicative as to how important the community – the Church really is! This is about us as a body – not just us as individuals. Of course, it does take each of us as individuals to do our part in being strong – study, worship, participating in the life and mission of the church, in prayer and outreach.

But we, the church, exist because of the vine. Jesus is the one who established the church. Who gave his life for the church. But why is the church important? Is it for our own enjoyment? For our own comfort? Is it so we have a family of faith to be with and to gain help from? Is it so we can learn and grow ourselves?

Of course it is! But that isn’t all. Jesus said, as he was about to ascend into heaven, “Go! Go out to the ends of the earth and make disciples, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. And I will be with you.” (Matthew 28:19-20, my paraphrase).

Jesus established the church for the mission of growing disciples. Why is that so important – besides the fact that people can benefit greatly from knowing the love of God?

Remember how I said that I learned that the trunk of the vine – the vine itself – is stronger and healthier when it has lots of healthy, strong branches? Well, Jesus, the vine, is stronger today because of the church. Jesus’ ministry is more vital, and much

stronger when the church is mighty and healthy and strong and bearing fruit – full of love.

Jesus said, “Those who believe in me will do the works I do, and in fact, will do greater works than these because I am going to the Father” (John 14:12). When the church is really being the church, Jesus ministry is stronger than ever. People are loving, people are offering radical hospitality to one another and to the stranger, people are passionate about worshipping God, people are intentional about study and growth, people are willing to take risks in doing missions – in helping others and in spreading the good news of Jesus love and salvation, people find themselves not just being generous, but being extravagantly generous in giving their time, talents and treasures for the sake of the gospel.

And all that looks like beautiful fruit on the vine. All that looks like Christian love.

But how does God prune us? I get pruning plants. I understand how and why that is necessary. But how does God, the Gardener, prune us who are his children?

Here is an example: there have been times in my life when I have gone off in my own direction; wandered away, branched off on my own, seeking things that I thought I wanted or needed or desired. But somehow, those things eventually got cut away from me. Doors closed or even something happened that was very painful to me yet I learned a lesson and I turned back.

Sometimes I have been influenced – enticed – into reading about or listening to other voices that would have me believe other spiritual things than what I have been taught. Yet, every time I went just a little ways with exploring, I was cut off – not from God – not from Christ, my life – but from the thing that would separate me from Him.

I think God uses the Holy Spirit to help us discern, to call us back, to cut us off and help us grow in the right direction. I think God is the grower, the Holy Spirit is the pruner, and Jesus is our life source, our plant food.

We’ve been talking a lot, since I came to Holly, about growing the church. We want more people and that is a great goal. It’s great because we desire for others to have the joy of knowing God’s love for them and of knowing salvation through Jesus Christ, God’s Son and it great because, with more people, we can do more ministry, we have more resources.

But if we consider the vine and the branches analogy, we know that it’s possible to grow wild and crazy – to grow all over the place. But growth just for growth’s sake isn’t such a great thing. It can cause the branches – and even the vine to become weak – and lots of wild growth doesn’t usually produce fruit.

We want to focus on healthy growth, focusing on helping every branch to be strong and vital and fruit bearing. That love and care and attention we give to each branch – each disciple – is what will cause real growth – growth that will produce much fruit – the fruit of love. Careful, intentional growth takes time and love and care. It is slower, but it can give the strength we need to be fruitful and vital.

*“If you abide in me,” Jesus said, “and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”*

The thing is – if we abide in Christ – if he is our life source – his words of life live in us. What we would ask for is that we will bear much fruit for him – that we would love as he loves; that we would do as he does, that we would grow his church so that there would be strong disciples and so that his ministry would continue and be powerful and vital.

And *that* is what glorifies God, the Gardener! Paul writes in his letter to the church in Galatia that “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self control.”

When we exhibit those fruits in everything we do, we glorify God, the Gardner. When we stay close to the Vine we can’t help but grow and be strong and vital. We will be the church that extends the love of Christ to all we meet.

You are the vine, I am the branches, Jesus said. He is our plant food – the nourishment and sustenance we thrive on.

Amen.