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Zion Lutheran Church, Youngstown, Ohio

Weekend of Sunday, April 29, 2018
5th Sunday of Easter/Lectionary X/Proper X/Year B
Primary Text: John 15:1-8
Sermon Title: “Spring Gardening”

Theme

On the night of his arrest, Jesus taught his disciples about the relationship they would have with him. Those who abide in his word and love would bear fruit, for apart from him, they could do nothing.

Text

[Jesus said:] ¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Sermon

You may recall that I announced last weekend that I was going to be out last week. Monday morning I drove to Angola, Indiana to the Region 6 First Call Theological Education Conference. Allow me to remind you that I am a mentor for the Synod's 2016 class of newly ordained pastors. Those are the three that were ordained right here at Zion in the fall of 2016. I will be their mentor for three years. Anyway, that conference was Monday through Wednesday noon and then I took the one-hour drive south and went to Ft. Wayne to visit my mother. I was with her through Friday morning. And since I know you are all going to ask, my mother is well enough for an 82 year old. She continues to live independently, drive, manage her own affairs and do most anything she wants to without any assistance, so I am thankful for that.

That has little to do with this sermon except that the farther west I drove the more signs I saw of the agricultural season taking shape. I went out and back on the toll-road and as you know, there are many large fields that were already prepared for the season and some, I am sure are already planted. There are also many large nurseries at which I saw workers preparing the trees and shrubs for sale. And orchards and vineyards which were prepared for the season in the fall and winter.

I am not an expert on growing grapes and have never grown grapes myself. But my grandfather who owned the farm next to my parent's farm had a two-row vineyard that he tended to and harvested so that my grandmother and my mother could make jelly. I did help him prune the vineyard a season or two and that is about the extent of my knowledge and experience, so what I am about to tell you comes more from my research than from my experience. Some of you may know better. Keep it to yourself and get your own church.

Grape vines are pruned back severely every fall and winter. If you have driven toward Buffalo to go skiing in the winter then you know what I am talking about. The vineyards look like rows of wires with thick T's fixed to them. A productive vine is not a very pretty thing.

Grapevines do not produce grapes from that "old wood". They produce fruit on what is called "one-year old wood." What the heck does that mean? When a bud sprouts in spring and grows into a new shoot within the larger grape plant, the shoot

turns from green to brown by the end of the growing season, at which point it is considered one-year old wood. The following spring some of the buds on one-year-old wood will grow flowers (which develop into fruit), while the buds on older wood produce only leaves or shoots.

The primary goal of pruning is to maximize the amount of one-year old wood on each grapevine without encouraging the plant to produce so many grape clusters that it lacks the energy and nutrients to fully ripen them. You see, left to its own devices, a grapevine grows to a dense mass of mostly older wood with relatively little “fruiting wood” each year. And dense vegetation in the form of the grape leaves leads to poor air circulation, which encourages fungal diseases. Productive vineyards remove 70 to 90 percent of the previous year’s growth each winter.

The second purpose for pruning grapes is to encourage the vines to grow a structure that is conducive to harvesting and which conforms to the shape of the trellis the vine is growing on. The aim is to create an orderly system of evenly spaced vines that resembles the branches of a tree. Most vineyards utilize a system of one main trunk with two or four main branches that angle off at 90 degrees along heavy-duty wires positioned a few feet above the ground. Each winter, excess vine growth is cut back to the main trunk and branches to preserve the structure. Grapevines are capable of growing to enormous proportions, hence the need for regular pruning.

Now you may have a grapevine at your home and you love the way it produces big beautiful leaves, but you are frustrated that it doesn’t produce better fruit. Well, you better decide what you want; a pretty plant or a productive plant, because you can’t have it both ways.

Then there is a work to do in the summer too, and that is called “leaf pulling.” Leaf pulling is done just after flowering, when fruit set is complete so the pollination process is not disturbed. Leaf pulling is done so that the fruit gets sunlight penetration and allow the vines to dry off much quicker after rain or heavy dew and thus will make the vines less susceptible to the spread of fungus diseases. Furthermore, and most importantly, leaves will make less energy available for grape development.

And that is your agricultural lesson for the day. I hope you found it interesting.

Now we don't know that much about Joseph and Mary and their life with Jesus and their other children, but we know that Joseph was a carpenter by trade. I don't know how Jesus knew so much about vines, and vinetending, but he certainly managed to use what he knew to apply it to the life of discipleship.

And it works pretty well I think. Like a new vine that will just grow into a leafy woody low-fruit-yielding plant, we who confess "that we are born into sin and cannot free ourselves", when left to our own devices will grow into ill-mannered, what's in it for me, selfish, egotistical, narcissists – cavemen, in other words.

But God revealed in Jesus Christ calls us to a life that is so much more. He demonstrated and taught that his disciples are to love, help, preserve, feed, bring healing to, and pray for our fellow created beings, human and otherwise.

And we constantly need Jesus' teaching and training or like that unattended vine in the vineyard, we will do what we do naturally and revert back to that ill-mannered, what's in it for me, selfish, egotistical, narcissist. That's why I need to be in church every week. I need to hear those words of forgiveness and be drawn back into the Spirit's tether, and be encouraged in my own discipleship.

Jesus used this metaphor of the vinegrower, the vine, and the branch to explain the life of the disciple and our role in the vineyard of God, if you will. And it is not something any of us naturally want to hear, I will admit.

First of all Jesus said he is the vine and God, our Heavenly Father is the vinegrower. We are just the branch. And while we may not like that metaphor and don't want to be the branch, it's like saying I don't want to be a male human being. I wasn't given a choice. I am what I am by God's grace.

Having resolved that, Jesus said we are branches in his metaphor. Now after the pruning is done this metaphor is more obvious: if a branch is pruned off the vine will it just be fine as an independent branch laying on the ground? No, it is cut-off and is dead, worthless, and as Jesus concluded, gathered up and thrown into the fire. That doesn't sound like a desirable outcome for us, does it my fellow branches?

All metaphors break down after a while, and one of the places that this metaphor breaks down is that vines don't think. They just do what vines do. But God created

human beings with the gift of intellect – we can think, and that is where we get into trouble. Most of the time we don't want to prune our lives to be more productive for God or anyone else. But we *are* God's creation, and so we need to be to be pruned to be more productive for God's kingdom purposes.

But, as naturally happens in life, along the way we pick up habits and routines, likes and dislikes, maybe even friends, all things that may not be good for us as disciples of Jesus Christ. This may be difficult for us to admit, but we may need some of them pruned out of our lives and this can be painful. This is another place where the metaphor breaks down: as far as I know, there is no damage done to the vine as it is pruned. It doesn't complain, or cry, or miss that pruned branch. It can be more difficult for us.

And why would we want to prune aspects of our lives? Because we can never be more successful, or happier, or whatever attribute you want to use, than when we are who God created us to be. Do you want to be all that you can be? Don't join the US Army! Seek the will of God for your life and do what is necessary to be all that you were created to be.

Raisin' the Bar Challenge

If you are a disciple of Jesus Christ, and if you are hearing my voice then I presume that you are at some level, then you should want to glorify your Heavenly Father by bearing fruit as a disciple.

This requires much of you, the *you* that you and your environment and your culture and your sinful self have made you into. This happens to all of us, this *you* is not who God created you to be. In the paradox of the disciple's life, in giving much of yourself, you will become more of who *you* were created to be

So my Raisin the Bar Challenge is this, consider deep self-examination on who you are and what has happened to you throughout your years. I am certain that you will find branches, areas of your life that you are ashamed of, embarrassed about, or will come to realize are not godly. And then pray to God asking that the Holy Spirit show you what needs to be pruned out of your life, so that you are less "old wood" and more "fruiting wood" so that you can be more of who God created you to be.

Then reflect on everything you know about Jesus Christ, our model of the godly life, and perhaps look at other heroes of scripture, and other godly examples you have known in your life, and include in your prayers, a request that the strength of the Holy Spirit guide you, moment by moment, through the rest of your life so that you will indeed bear much fruit and glorify your Heavenly Father, for this is our purpose.

Prayer

Lord God, master and owner of this vineyard we call life. We give you thanks that our Lord Jesus gives us hard lessons like this so that we are reminded of our place in your creation. We are his, and disconnected from him we are nothing. Through your Holy Spirit, help us to find joy in being fruitful for your kingdom purposes. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen