

Sermon Text – Sunday, April 28, 2024 – Pastor Paula Kraus

**1st Reading: Acts 8:26-50; 2nd Reading: I John 4:7-21
Scripture for Message: John 15:1-8 “Pruned”**

In this section of John from chapters 13 through 17, Jesus continues his farewell to the disciples on that last night, this is after the foot washing, after sharing the bread and cup – His body, His blood. It is part of Jesus loving them into an understanding of the meaning of his life and his mission. In this message, Jesus is in no way threatening or condemning the disciples – this is an urging for his closest friends and confidants to continue a connection and to continue what Jesus started.

Jesus tells his disciples he is the vine – reminiscent of Psalm 80:8 “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it” that vine referred to the nation of Israel, now Jesus states “I am the true vine.” He reminds the disciples that God is the one who tends to and cultivates the branches of the vine so that they are fruitful. The branches cannot bear fruit if they do not remain connected to the vine. Jesus reminds his disciples that they are already cleaned and pruned because they have listened to Jesus’ teachings and have followed him in his ministry.

Jesus urges them to maintain that connection for without it they can do nothing – but through Christ and with Christ all things are possible. Without maintaining the connection, they have established, that relationship with Jesus, they will wither and die. Jesus reminds them that their identity remains in the vine. The reapers gather the withered branches and throw them into the fire. But, when they maintain a connection to the vine, whatever they ask for to bear fruit God will provide. In that way, God receives the honor as Jesus’ disciples bear fruit.

John is writing these words to his community, his churches, as they look to live as followers of Jesus when Jesus is no longer with them. John is writing to them to provide reassurance that they follow the true path, the true savior, the true redeemer even when their former synagogues and their former community has turned away from them. Even when their former places of worship are not available to them, they remain connected in love to each other and to Jesus the Christ. John reminds his community that they are capable of greater things as they remain or abide with Christ who abides with / in them.

I wonder – when the statement is made that, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” is it a proper way to understand what John intended to convey or even a proper way to understand Jesus words. Would Jesus threaten like that in his farewell speech to his closest friends? Or maybe – God’s pruning

work benefits us and does not threaten. I wonder if the penalty for not bearing fruit is an empty fruitless life, not abandonment by God. In addition, I wonder if what is “cut off” or pruned are the unfruitful parts of our shared missions rather than individuals that do not bear fruit. As God prunes away the branches that do not bear fruit, he redirects resources to the branches that still hold potential for thriving. This is a good message for the church while we contemplate our mission and ministries.

In this passage, Jesus tells us that without our connection and relationship with God, what we attempt to do to bear fruit for the kingdom, will not succeed. But as we remain connected through Jesus, each other, and the Spirit we will receive what we need to be fruitful for the kingdom. Like John’s community, we need to look for the ways Jesus remains with us, we sometimes need to actively remind ourselves of that connection.

Jesus remains with us as we partake of the body and blood during our celebration of the Lord’s Supper. This was his message to the disciples on that night when he shared that last supper with his companions. His body symbolically given to them, and his blood poured out for them. It is a reminder to us, as we recall his death and resurrection whenever we gather in his name, we also recall his promise to return. Jesus body as the bread and cup exists with us, abiding in the sacrament of communion and as we gather as “the body of Christ.” Accordingly, Jesus remains in us as we continue his mission to the world according to God’s will.

I question how we know what this fruitfulness that God requires is, and how we know when we are successful in our attempts to be fruitful. It is not readily apparent that the things we do are producing fruit for God’s kingdom. We may witness or do some excellent work the results of which never reach our eyes or ears. As we worship and fellowship in a community of believers what is our assurance that we will not be thrown away, into the fire and burned? The answer I believe is that Jesus’ words are assurance to us, “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” “already you are clean because you have heard my voice” “You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.” Jesus’ words, as we listen to Him, as we believe his words and promises, and as we come together in love and fellowship, those are our assurances of the continuing connection we have with the “true vine.”

Quite possibly the fruit God desires is to continue Jesus’ mission to create a just and righteous world. I wonder if this means we are fruitful when we begin to see the new ways the Holy Spirit calls us to work in the world. God is not done yet – the kin-dom God desires is part of the already and the not yet – Christ remains in us, with us, as we remain in him. That work of love,

compassion, and mercy must continue, on earth as it is in heaven. That is the fruitfulness I believe Jesus is asking of us as he urges us to abide with him. That abiding is not only to remain with him but also to stay sharing a common mission and purpose. He is urging his disciples to “stick with it” and God will do the necessary work to sustain the vine. God is, after all, the one who prunes.

Let us take a detour because a word of caution is necessary. There have been many attempts to take verse seven of this section of scripture out of context and claim only that “ask for whatever you wish, and it will be provided.” Many of us have had experiences to the contrary so is what Jesus saying false? I recall a couple who seriously took these few words to mean that if they prayed for a washer and dryer God would provide. Along those lines this church has had the experience of praying for a need and finding our prayers answered in a manner that was not planned or anticipated. But how do we interpret these words? If we do not get what we “ask for” does that mean God has thrown us into the pile to burn? I wonder if the distinction is not clearly before us as we look at this verse in context.

There are other ways to look at that one verse through how scholars translated it from the original language. How does this sound to you, “But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon” doesn’t that change the meaning a little? Another translation reads, “If you abide in Me and My voice abides in you, anything you ask will come to pass for you.” My thoughts are if we take this verse out of the context of the rest of the passage, we set ourselves up for disappointment. If we, however, look at this through the eye of producing fruit for God’s kin-dom a different interpretation becomes known.

Jesus, in this statement, is not giving carte blanche to provide him with a grocery list of our needs personal or corporate – we might agree that within the context of this passage Jesus is talking about the fruit we bear as we proclaim and glorify God – ask for what you wish in that regard and your requests will be acted upon. Because we abide in Christ, all that we ask, and desire will resemble everything that Christ asks and desires – a world that is just and righteous for all creation. That is the benefit of abiding in Christ and the benefit of the cleansing and pruning God does on our behalf.

The last verse in this passage has something to say to all of us – “My father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” What does it mean to any of us to “glorify the Father” or to bring glory to God. We can claim that as our primary reason for worship and the main function of our Christian identity – to bring glory to God our creator. First what does it mean at all to glorify something, or someone? One definition tells us that to glorify

something is to reveal and proclaim its significance and importance. So, to glorify God is to reveal or proclaim God's significance. Jesus glorified God as he was obedient and faithful to God's plan. The fruit Jesus produces makes God known in the world - God is indeed glorified by the Christian's fruitfulness.

So, what are the ways we, as Christians, produce fruit and bring glory to God? I can list some, we are fruitful as we feed the hungry – providing donations to the Feed My Sheep food pantry. We bring God glory as we offer space for those who need compassion and mercy as they struggle with addictions. And it glorifies God when we contribute out of our abundance to meet the growing needs in the world outside our doors. We bring glory to God through our identity as Christians not by self-identification, not by going to church, not by doctrinal expertise, or memorization of scripture, but by completing Jesus' mission in works of love and justice.

Who are the ones we can identify that need to feel God's presence – can we be the body of Christ for them? Who are the ones lost and abandoned in our world or community – is it possible for the church, this church, to help them find a connection to Jesus? You know, it may be tempting to make church convenient and comfortable, but the world is still broken, and God is not done.

God continues to prune and cleanse, cutting off every branch that does not bear grapes, pruning and tending to every grape-bearing branch so it will bear even more fruit. Sure, pruning can be painful. We might need to give up somethings that are not fruitful for God's kin-dom, we might need to make changes to the things we have always done. Sometimes our dreams will have to be refocused and we will need to move in different directions due to God's pruning and cutting off the dead branches. The bottom line, for all of us to remember is that this was a loving message from Jesus to his closest friends, it is a message of love for us as well. Abide in him, connect to him within the body of Christ and in love you will be capable of remarkable things – without him you can do nothing, without Jesus our mission and ministries will fail. Without love we are fruitless branches.