

Sermon
John 15:1-8
5 Easter-B; Sunday, May 2, 2021
Gloria Dei Lutheran Church, Coos Bay, Oregon

"Think about yourself. Talk about yourself. Use "I" as often as possible. Listen greedily to what people say about you. Expect to be appreciated. Be suspicious of what others say. Be jealous and envious. Be sensitive to slights. Never forgive a criticism. Trust nobody but yourself. Insist on consideration and respect. Demand agreement with your own views on everything. Sulk if people are not grateful to you for favors shown them. Never forget a service you have rendered. Shirk your duties if you can. Do as little as possible for others."

Oh, this isn't part of the gospel reading, thankfully. This description of self-centeredness is part of a book by Randy Paterson, entitled, *How to be Miserable: 40 Strategies You Already Use*. It's funny look at the human condition, but we Christians sometimes fall into the trap of reading the Bible in the same self-centered way.

As if **we** were the point.

I have come to realize that if I'm not careful, I do it All. The. Time.

And that's what can happen when we read the Gospel for today. And in it, verse 6 is one of those strange readings, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." You don't abide in me? Well, then, you are cut off, discarded. And if that were not enough, let's be sure to throw you into the furnace of hell for good measure.

As if Jesus' words are a rationale for judgment.

As if Jesus' words condemn us when we feel bad about ourselves or justify us as if we've always been a part of the "in" crowd.

As if Jesus had only me – or us - in mind.

We are quite accomplished when it comes to judgment -- so quick to determine who doesn't belong. And we seem only to get better at that judge-y part all the time.

But in this gospel reading, WE are not the point. The fact is, the community to which John writes had indeed been thrown away, thrown out, condemned. Verse 6 is not a verse of condemnation because condemnation is not what Jesus came to do. Rather, this verse is a statement of life – because without being connected to a life source, abundant life is not possible.

If you want to know what that life source, what our God is like, John uses the image of the vine to remind his readers that they need to look no farther than their connection to Jesus. John uses this last "I AM" statement to point, once again, to Jesus, who is God on earth. God with flesh on. Immanuel. Twice Jesus will identify himself as the vine, first, as the true vine and then as "I AM the vine." The image of the vine offers a picture for the disciples to see themselves as able to what they have been sent to do, all because of their connection to the vine.

And to bear fruit is to go out into the mission field to do what we have been called and sent to do.

Jesus first uses this image to describe his relationship with God before he begins to show how this image will depict his abiding relationship with his disciples. Jesus is the vine, "my Father" is the vine grower. Like any good vine grower, the Father tends the vine with care, pruning where necessary so that it will bear as much fruit as possible.

But underlying this image of fruit are the roots of dependence. The vine needs the vinegrower as much as the vinegrower needs the vine. The vine needs the vinegrower for its optimal growth and production, even for its abundance. But the vine will produce even more fruit, fruit in abundant quantities, if it is cared for. The vinegrower needs the vine to produce, to make abundance possible for nourishment and to support his family. Mutual support is essential, and I think it is the point in the story.

But why this image now?

Jesus knows what's next.

So, these last words of Jesus, words that scholars of John's gospel call the "Farewell Discourse," are all about leaving his disciples with words of comfort and hope in the midst of their troubled hearts and worried souls.

Because the vine and its branches are together an image that suggests profound dependence. Profound reliance. Because living an abundant life is nothing without belonging, without intimacy, without relationship.

How can I bear fruit? How can I imagine being beyond myself? How can we realize our potential if we have no grounding, no sense of origin, no affirmation of possibility outside ourselves? Oh, please, God, don't prune away another part of me.

At any given moment, even when things are going relatively well, there are still so many difficult things with which to contend in this life and it often feels like being pruned. Or needing to be.

Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just feels like being cut, cut down by life's tragedies great or small, cut down by disappointment or despair, cut down by illness or job loss or other circumstances beyond our control and left to wither and die.

Our misconception, our weakness lies in thinking we are able to bear that fruit all by ourselves.

But the bearing of fruit depends on connection. It depends on belonging. As soon as you think you can produce anything from the basis of your own power, from your own efforts, from your own sense of independence, think about the results for a moment. What kind of fruit will *that* be?

Because bearing fruit has everything to do with who you are in any relationship. I wonder if this is what we tend to forget or ignore. That the ways we show our faith are not individual expressions of our theological commitments and convictions but the way we show our faith is deeply rooted in and arises from the communities of our lives. That there is an expertly-pruned potential for faith embodied if we do not realize that the bearing fruit of our faith is premised on dependence.

I wonder if there is a fear of bearing fruit. And that fear has many levels. Because once we bear fruit, we lose control. We chance exposure. We may have been clipped, not

where we thought should be trimmed, but in the places that vinegrower will prune this year. Once we're pruned, we're exposed. Others will be able to see on whom or what we rely; in whom and in what we gather and store our strength.

And once we're out there? Well, it's awfully hard to take it back. Impossible, actually. And others are then free to pick and choose the fruit they prefer, like perusing the options at a farmer's market or in the produce section in the grocery store.

Bearing fruit is risky business. It will reveal who you are and on whom and what you depend. It will expose your lack of self-sufficiency. It will show others that there is no other way to be except to be dependent. Many will think it's a sign of weakness. Many will think the ties should be broken and you should go it alone. Many will think that being cut off is beneficial because it will result in some sort of self-actualized and admirable independence.

But we know they're wrong.

Because here's the point: if Jesus had only said, "abide in me or else," that would be a different matter. But it's not. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "as I abide in you." This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise, that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens, God in Jesus will bring all things to a good end.

Jesus has come that we may have life and have it abundantly.

Not as self-centered, self-sufficient miserable beings, but as pruned branches, clinging to each other and dependent on the vine all the while producing an amazing, abundant crop of fruit.

Over and over again.

Amen.