

“Vine-Ripened Love”

John 15:5-17

A Celebration of the 80th Anniversary of the Woodside Presbyterian Church

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The Woodside Church

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Eighty years ago, eighty people crowded into the tiny chapel across the street on the evening of April 28th and took a step into history. By the close of that worship service, Woodside was born.

So, what was life like for the saints who planted this little tree eight decades ago? In 1946 nobody had a television set. There were no polio shots, penicillin, frozen foods, Xerox, plastics, contact lens or Frisbees. Credit cards, laser beams, ball-point pens, dishwashers, clothes dryers and air conditioners were still on the drawing board. Fast food was what you ate during Lent and McDonalds was that nice Scottish family that lived down the block. Cells were in a prison, the Web was spun by spiders, the Net was used for fishing, “chips” were made of chocolate, hardware was lumber and software wasn’t even a word! “Making out” referred to how you did on your exam and “rock music” was your grandmother’s lullaby. For one nickel you could ride a street car, make a phone call, buy a Pepsi or enough stamps to mail one letter and two postcards. You could buy a new Chevy Coupe for \$600 but few could afford it; which was a pity because gas was only 11 cents a gallon. Ah the good old days!

Back in those good old days a Leader of Woodside wrote:

This was a year of the Lord’s blessing for Woodside Church. We have seen our youth work grow, our Sunday school attendance increased about 200% over the previous year, the outreach of our Church extended and intensified, our organizations take on new responsibilities. We are thankful for the new members that have been added to our number. We are grateful that God has enabled us to meet our budget and contribute to mission causes. “This is the Lord’s doing, we will rejoice and be glad in it.”

That was penned by Charles Brackbill, the Princeton seminary student who pushed the Presbytery to officially charter this church. There are two things I love about those inspiring words: they focus on incredible growth and they give all the glory for that growth to Jesus. That, plain and simple, is the 80-year story of Woodside Church. We can talk about budgets, buildings and ministries, about pastors, staff, elders, and deacons. But what really matters is the growth God gives. What the Apostle Paul said about the church in Corinth also applies to Woodside:

I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. I Corinthians 3:6-7

Most people do not look forward to turning 80. A T shirt on the beach said, “I’m not 80. I’m \$79.95 plus tax.” Another T shirt said on the front “80 is not old.” On the back it said, “If you’re a tree.” We all know 25 years is the Silver Anniversary, 50th is gold. Do you know what 80 is? The Oak Anniversary. At the heart of our campus is a mighty Oak tree. It lifts up strong branches and drops abundant acorns. I know, I’ve been beamed by them. Like that great oak, the 80-year-old tree of Woodside is just getting started. I believe, with all my heart, God wants His Church to grow. I’ll go even further: God will make His Church grow. So the question is not, “What must we do to grow the Church?” but rather, “What are we doing that is keeping His Church from growing?” How are we blocking God’s growth at Woodside? Or, to state it positively, “How can we be part of God’s growth plan?” Here are three gardening rules from Scripture.

Root: Are You Attached to The True Vine? Jesus said “I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener” and “I am the vine, you are the branches” (John 15:1, 5). Permit me to switch my metaphor from Oak Tree to Vine because that’s what Jesus uses. There are hundreds of varieties of vines: Wisteria, Clematis, Honeysuckle, English Ivy and Grape vines. They climb over buildings and trellises producing brilliant flowers and abundant fruit. But there are also harmful vines like poison ivy or the Kudzu vine.

In life, there are just as many vines. We are attached to many of them: The corporate vine, the school vine, the internet, social media, AI vine, the sports vine, the family vine. Some of them are important for our growth. Unfortunately, all of them have faults. Corporations provide income and products but they also reward people who are unethical, aggressive and greedy. Schools enlighten minds. But they are filled with cliques and competition and they won’t let God in the door. Families nurture and raise us. But every family has its share of bitterness, hurt and pain. What looked like a beautiful flowering vine can be as deadly as a strangling Kudzu or as venomous as Poison Ivy.

Jesus did not say, “I am just another vine alongside these others.” He said, “I am the true, genuine or real vine.” He is the only Vine that won’t harm you. He is the only Vine which fills you with pure unconditional love. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love” (John 15:9). You become like the vine you are on. If there is anger in your home vine, you’ll feel anger flow through you. If you are drinking in alcohol, lust or drugs, they will define you. If you live in a highly competitive, take-no-prisoners corporate world, you’ll treat everyone that way. If you are hooked on the materialistic vine, you’ll acquire things and never be satisfied. If you are attached to Jesus, love will be the lifeblood which flows through you. You cannot be on two vines at once. You must choose. Jesus says, “Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. Apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:4,5). There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. A branch attached to Jesus will be with other branches in the Vineyard – what we call the Church. If you are on the Vine of Jesus, you can still be in business, school and family. This world needs Christians to branch out and share the love they receive from the Roots of Jesus. This fall, make a commitment to be firmly attached to the True Vine Jesus.

That leads to the second gardening tip: **Shoot – How is Your Branch Growing?**

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He *lifts up* every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes (or cleans) so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. John 15:1-3

Scholars usually translate the word in italics above as “cuts off.” But it literally means “to lift up.” That change makes all the difference in the world. If you are struggling to bear fruit, God does not cut you out. Instead, He lifts you up off the ground, cleans off the dirt and raises you up to the sunshine where you can become more fruitful. Those who are fruitful are cleaned by pruning. The result is that every branch is cleaned by God to bear more fruit. No believer should be discouraged or egotistical. No Christian should feel inferior or superior. Everybody needs a good cleaning. How does God clean our branches: with Scripture.

You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. John 15:3, 7-8

Reading and applying God’s Word is the best way to stay clean from the stains of this world and from the temptation of spiritual pride. Keep reading and applying God’s Word every day. We will provide you with a reading plan for the Fall Series The Way Home. Make this the time when you finally get into a Growth Group and study God’s Word together. This is the way to produce the fruit of joy. Jesus said, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete” (John 15:11).

And that leads to the third gardening tip: **Fruit – What Are You Producing?** The main fruit Jesus wants to grow in you is Love. He said, “My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that he lay down his life for his friends” (John 15:12-13). This is not primarily an emotional feeling. When Hollywood talks about love, the ultimate expression is laying down in bed together. When Jesus talks about love, the ultimate expression is laying down your life for someone as He did for us. The fruit of love on Jesus’ Vine is sacrificial love, selfless love. And remember: a branch cannot eat the fruit it produces. Love must be given away.

During the Second battle of Fallujah in Iraq in 2004, Sgt. Rafael Peralta led his team of Marines into a house occupied by insurgents. As the first in, Peralta suffered a gunshot wound to the face and fell to the floor. Seconds later, a grenade was tossed into the room. Two Marines began pounding against a locked door to escape. Still conscious, Peralta grabbed the grenade and cradled it to his chest before it exploded. One Marine caught shrapnel and was severely wounded. But several more lives were saved by Rafael’s selfless act.¹ He laid down his life for His friends.

¹ Gordon Trowbridge, Army Times, reported in USA Today (11-22-04).

Jesus cradled our death in His nailed pierced hands. The fruit of love He produces in us is not one great act of sacrifice, but a daily laying down of our lives. It means serving your family without complaining. It means living a godly life whether people are looking or not. It means being honest in business even when it costs you. It means helping others without worrying who gets the credit. It means loving people who are different than you, who do not love you, who may even oppose you. “This is my command: Love each other” (v. 17). That’s the fruit He wants to grow in you.

And that’s the fruit I see growing all around me at Woodside. Over the last 80 years, the people of Woodside planted multiple seeds of faith. Through their prayers, their giving, their service they scattered many acorns which have grown into the church we see today. They always asked, “How can we reach more people with the Good News of Jesus Christ? How can we serve more people with the love of Jesus Christ?” Why did they grow this building? Why did they start a Preschool? Why do we offer Alpha, Adventure Club, Sunday school, Growth Groups and Youth Groups? Why offer four worship services? Why build Habitat homes? Prison and recovery ministries, Food ministries? Code Blue? Why sponsor an Orphanage and churches in Zambia, wells and healthcare in Mozambique, church planting in India, building projects in the Dominican Republic, the Bahamas and Appalachia? Why? One simple answer: Love!

Love! A huge vine with lots of leaves is useless to a gardener. A huge church building with no fruit is useless to God. It’s the fruit of love that makes the difference. This Fall, I ask you to plant Seeds of Faith. We gave you an acorn this morning – keep it as a reminder to keep planting seeds. You can Love God by planting seeds of Praise and Thanksgiving. You can Grow in Grace by planting seeds of Spiritual Growth. You can Share with Others by planting seeds of Service. We have many ideas on the back. Choose as many as you like. Over the next weeks we will ask you to write on a leaf the seed you are planting and place it on our tree in the lobby.

Woodside, I witness you give the fruit of love – especially when people are in the darkest moments of their lives. Don and Fiona had questions about God and no connection to a congregation. So when their daughter Michaela was born, one of the things they discussed was how to teach her about God. When she turned three, they decided to enroll her at Woodside Christian Preschool. At the orientation, Don and Fiona explained to their daughter’s teacher she would need to tell Michaela who Jesus is since she’d never been to church.

I never met Don. The first time I met Fiona was the afternoon of September 11, twenty-five years ago. It was little Michaela’s first day of preschool. Fiona came into my office in tears to tell me Don was on the 101st floor of Tower Two and was missing. “What should I tell my daughter?” she asked. “Wait until you know more about Don,” I suggested, “and then tell her when she’s ready.” We prayed and Fiona went out to pick up her daughter.

Fiona allowed me and all of you to be at her side during some of the most difficult days of that first year: the funeral for Don here at Woodside, her first trip to Ground Zero,

helping the workers at St. Paul's Chapel, the day our own John Hughes from the FBI came to her home to say they found some of Don's remains, the second funeral for Don, the planning of the Garden of Reflection.

During those dark days, Fiona turned to God for help. "Deep down, I believe. But I ignored religion for a long time. I began to question things on Sept. 11. You either believe or you don't. And the bottom line for me is it was more comfortable to believe. I need it very much."

Woodside – that is what you give: the fruit of Love. It makes an eternal difference, especially in the darkest moments. On September 12, Michaela asked her mom, "Is Daddy at work?" "No," said her mother carefully choosing her words, "His building isn't there anymore. We don't know where Daddy is." "I miss Daddy," the little girl said. "Well, I'm still here. You've got me," Fiona reassured her. "And Daddy will always love you, and you have to keep him in your heart."

And then little three-year-old Michaela, who had never been to church, said something she learned on her first day at Woodside preschool. "Mommy, Jesus Christ is in my heart."

Woodside, keep on planting that seed of love.