



“GROWING IN THE VINE”

John 15:1-17

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A few years ago, one of the churches that I served had a vision to build a new church so that we could expand our children’s ministry, our outreach to the community, and provide enhanced worship experiences in a more accessible sanctuary. As you may know all too well, when you are in the middle of a building project—whether it is at home, at work, or even in the life of the church—there are always a variety of opinions about what should happen throughout the project. After a particularly difficult day when we were still in the earliest phases, dreaming about what God might want to do with us, I went out to see one of the leaders of the church. Phil was a dreamer like me. He also had the ability to help me see a way forward when others left me stumped along the way. As a township supervisor for a local community, as well, he was a local presence who knew well that leading is sometimes difficult work.

In addition to being a township supervisor, Phil also happened to be a local farmer. When I arrived at Phil’s house, his wife told me that he was out discing, or plowing, the field in the tractor. I figured I would catch up with him at another time. His wife knew me well, however, and she knew I needed to chat with Phil. So she told me to just go out to meet him in the field. She pointed out the appropriate field and told me how to get out to see Phil.

When I arrived at the field, sure enough, there was Phil in his tractor with the disc cutting through the dirt in the field behind him. Not wanting to get run over, I made my way out towards the tractor so that he could see me and waved to him as I crossed the field. When Phil saw me, he stopped the tractor, opened the door, and invited me to join him inside the cab.

Not batting an eyelash, he stood over in the side of the tractor cab and invited me to sit down and take the wheel. I wasn’t so sure that he knew what he was doing. While I was certain that I could probably steer a tractor across a field just fine, I knew that the last thing I wanted to do was mess up the beautiful rows he had just plowed for planting. Phil spent too much time getting those fields ready for me to destroy it in a single swipe. I knew nothing about how to plow a straight line across 40 acres’ worth of field. Besides, how would I begin to turn around at the end of the row when I arrived there?

I was no farmer. I didn't know a thing about plowing that field. Phil, on the other hand, was a farmer. He knew what the field needed. He put me in the driver's seat and guided me on how to move that tractor and the plow behind me so that the field would be ready for planting.

As I maneuvered that tractor across the field, we talked about our hopes and dreams for the church and what God was doing among us in that community. Phil reassured me that God was indeed at work even as we experienced differences of opinions from time to time.

While we chatted about the church and God's hopes for us, every now and then, Phil would place his hands on the steering wheel and help guide the tractor and the plow in the right direction as we moved across that forty-acre parcel of land.

After a little while, I was feeling better. I got to the end of a row and needed to move on to some other appointments that I had that day. Phil took the wheel again and continued where I had left off as I hopped down and went about my day. I had worried about my own ability to drive that tractor. I knew that I could not do it on my own. In the fields, however, I realized that I didn't have to do it on my own. My friend, Phil, was with me all the way, coaching me and guiding me so that the fields would yield a good crop in the coming year. I simply had to yield to the farmer who entrusted his field to my care and stayed with me as I plowed through it.

Jesus once said to his disciples:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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.¹

In our scripture lesson this morning from John's gospel, Jesus is speaking to his disciples during a difficult moment in their ministry together. They have just shared the Last Supper together on the night before he meets with death. At the end of the meal, Jesus begins to tell his closest friends what is going to happen to him. After reassuring them that he will be with them through the power of the Holy Spirit and offering them words of peace and comfort, Jesus encourages the disciples to "abide" in him or, in other words, to "make themselves at home" in him.

Jesus uses the image of a "vine" to help the disciples understand to a greater degree what it might mean for them to stick with him or "abide" in him. This vine image would be a common site for them throughout Palestine. Vines produce grapes which are harvested to produce wine. Jesus is the "Vine," the source of their life, and they are the branches that can only live when they are connected to him. He describes God, the Father, as the "vinegrower" who trims the branches of the vine so that they may bear fruit. It is also God who trims away the branches that no longer live. Apart from the vine, they are helpless and lifeless. Like the farmer who helped me to know where to steer the tractor so that the fields might yield the best fruit, the vine is rooted in the ground, giving life and definition to the branches so that they might produce the best crop.

When I was a kid, we had a big backyard at home. The previous owners of our house had planted a variety of bushes, roses, and flowers on our lot. Along the back fence, however, they also planted some grape vines. By the time we owned the home, the grape vines had grown all up and through the back fence. The vine and the branches were enmeshed in the fence itself. I'll always remember the year that Mom decided she was going to trim up those vines. She took my brother and me out into the yard and put us to work.

Mom would cut off a branch and then we'd have to weave it out of the fencing. It was quite a chore. It seemed like it took forever to trim those vines that day. You see, vines do not grow straight up and down. They grow in a variety of directions. The branches of the vine wrapped themselves not only around the fencing, but also around one another. There seemed to be strength in their numbers. It wasn't easy to pull those branches apart, especially when they were connected to the vine. The vine gave them strength, and it wasn't easy to tell one branch from another while it was connected to the vine. They looked like a part of a larger whole.

In our scripture lesson, Jesus is saying to the disciples, "I'm the vine, but you're the branches. When you are woven together, there's strength in you. When you're connected to me, there's life in you. When you need to be trimmed, God, the vinedresser, will do the trimming. Yet, know this: God's intention is for you to be fruitful and filled with life, attached to this vine."

Jesus goes on to describe that the fruit that they exhibit is the fruit of the love that flows from the vine through them and bursts forth into the world. He says:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.²

The word that Jesus uses for "friends" has a deeper meaning than just "acquaintances." Gail O'Day, in *The New Interpreter's Bible* commentary, reminds us that the word that Jesus uses actually means, "those who are loved."³ Jesus says that as disciples, we are "those who are loved." We're more than just friends, but "those who are loved." That's what it means for us to be connected to the "vine." Love flows through us, claims us, gives life to us, and pours forth from us as fruit.

On our own, we can't make the vine produce fruit any more than I could plow a straight line in a forty-acre field without the farmer who stayed with me in the cab. With God, however, we receive what we need to bear the fruit of love; to love one another with the love we have received in Christ.

As disciples, as branches in the vine, our task is to make God's love real in the world. We received the goodness of life from God; we receive life and love from the Vine without which we'd not be able to do a thing. And that life and love flow through us into fruit that transforms our world. O'Day reminds us again that the mark of a disciple is "to do works of love."⁴ Jesus says that the greatest love is to lay down one's life for "those who are loved," or "one's friends." This is how the Vine offers life to the branches and how the branches supply fruit so the world might experience and share this self-giving love.

Throughout the past several weeks, we've been talking about how many have offered their lives and gifts over the years so that we might experience the goodness of our God; so that we might know how greatly we are loved. They sacrificed, saved, and gave knowing that they were planting seeds for a harvest that they would not see immediately. Somehow, they seemed to know that when you live in the Vine, branches give their lives for the sake of the future fruit that they will bear for the world around them to taste, see, and know the goodness of God.

Together, we have tasted that goodness throughout our time at Birmingham and Berkley First. We harvest what generations prior to us have planted. Today, we are invited to offer ourselves and our gifts as an investment in a future harvest. While what we offer may be added to next year's anticipated income and expenses, we know that the ministry we do here today is simply the seeds we plant for others to harvest years down the road.

The children who planted bulbs two weeks ago will one day point out the flowers to their children, who will come to know God's great love for them because of the gifts we offer today.

In a world where our political discourse has become so divisive and hatred of those "other than us" has become an acceptable way of living, what might happen in the next 21 years if the children of our communities learned from us that there is a better way? What would happen if the children of our community learned today that living in the Vine means caring for one another and seeing one another as "God's beloved"? How might our world be different?

As 80 men gathered for a conference in this place yesterday to grow in our love for God and one another, at least 11 people were killed in a horrific mass shooting in a synagogue in Pittsburg. I came home to see the headlines scrolling across the bottom of the television screen. Tears came to my eyes and I was speechless. When I clammed up, Dawn said, "That's right. You've been at the men's conference all day. You didn't know." She realized that I was hearing the news for the first time as she had watched it all afternoon long. The only words I could bring to my lips were, "Lord, in your mercy, hear our prayer."

Then I began to realize how what we do in this place invites the people of our communities to find a better way and to value the sacredness of all of life. What if what we teach here actually helps someone in the depths of hatred or the depths of despair find value in all of life? We could be the difference that the world longs to experience when we give our lives for one another, investing in a harvest of love yet to come.

Two weeks ago, a rummage sale in this place brought people together across political and theological lines. The people with whom you work may have vastly different ideas than you do.

But in everything, there is a great love that you have for one another. Even more so, there is an even greater love that you have for the world around as you raised so much money for missions in our communities, nation, and throughout the world. That's the power of a love that can change the world. That's what happens when we find life in the Vine that is Jesus Christ. Lives are transformed and more fruit comes forth from the branches.

Over the last few weeks, several of you signed up to decorate your trunks for Trunk or Treat as children will come through our parking lot this afternoon and find great treats, fun times, and a warm welcome. Originally, we were planning for 200. The other day I received an email to plan for 400. Can you imagine what 400 children can do to change the world around us when they come to know God's great love for them here in this place?

All of that is made possible when we live generously; when we plant generously; when we invest generously in the harvests that are yet to come. When we're connected to the Vine, Jesus, he provides us with all that is needed to produce fruit that can change the world around us. Our Vine gives us all that we need to grow when we abide in the vine. When we let the love of Christ flow through us, it shows forth in loving actions for the world around us; a love that has the power to transform the world.

The other day I received a note from the child of a former member who had passed away several months ago. She was writing to thank us for the wonderful ways that our church was available to her family as her mom had passed away. She said that even though they had lived far away from here for years, it was like coming home. Her family was so thankful for the way one of our pastors reached out to them and cared for them in their time of need at the small memorial and inhuming that they held here. She's so thankful to know that her parents' remains are resting here in our Memorial Garden, in the place that they knew and loved as children.

Friends, that's love! That's the quality of the love that you make possible for people who walk through our doors in their times of greatest joy and greatest needs. That's a love that can change our world. Jesus gives us all that we need to bear fruit when we remain connected in the vine. God prunes us so that we might bear even more fruit along the way. God gives us what is needed for the harvests that God intends for us.

This week, as we've realized that we live in a world where bombs are sent in the mail, where people are innocently slaughtered as they come for worship on the Sabbath, and where lives are taken violently because of the color of one's skin, it may cause us to wonder what we can do. When violence and hatred seem to be so prolific, how can we make a difference?

How much of the harvest that we share today will we invest in future harvests of love? How much will transform the world? How much will make the difference? What will it take to transform the world?

We make our commitments today because we're committed to the harvest; we're committed to living in the Vine. The scriptures ring new in our ears, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good."⁵ It's what we do. It's how we remember who and whose we are. It

has the power to change the world. How can we give less than our best when we know the promise that “You will always harvest what you plant”⁶?

¹ John 15:1-5, NRSV.

² John 15:12-17, NRSV.

³ O’Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter’s Bible*, vol. IX., ed. Leander E. Keck, et al. (Nashville: Abingdon P, 1995).

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Romans 12:21, NIV.

⁶ Galatians 6:7.