

In God's Garden

Romans 11: 13-24

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By

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To the extent possible, effort has been made to preserve the quality of the spoken word in this written adaptation.

I want to take a moment of personal privilege to address this week's announcement that I intend to retire in 2021. I wish we were together here at the church for this conversation. But under the circumstances, the best I can do is talk with you through this technology. I want you to know, though, that I do look forward to when we can talk and share personally, and celebrate what God has given us during these past 15 years.

A new season is emerging for the church, and for me personally. I'll be 66 years old next spring and I'm looking forward to spending more time with my family who live in far-flung parts of the country. We've purchased a home in Nashville, Tennessee to be closer to two of our children and our five grandchildren. We plan to spend time there, as well as with our daughter and son-in-law in northern California.

Thank you for your trust and support as I learned how to become your pastor. Thank you for enriching my life, and the life of my entire family these past 15 years. Thank you for your prayers and notes and many kindnesses along the way. We have several more months together before I retire next year, and I look forward to seeing you personally when (hopefully) this pandemic is behind us.

You will receive information this week from the Session of the church regarding a process for moving forward with leadership transitions. I'm confident in the Lord that the best years are still ahead for San Marino Community Church. It has been my privilege to help strengthen the foundation upon which others can build. Speaking of foundations, let's turn now to our scripture text for today, as we continue in the sermon series **Less Fear. More Faith.**

Throughout the Scriptural witness, the life of the people of God is illustrated with agricultural images that may have been more familiar to them than to us. "Those whose hearts turn away from the Lord are like . . . shrubs in the desert . . . they live in the parched places in the wilderness." And conversely, "Those who trust in the Lord — whose trust IS the Lord — are like trees planted

by the water . . they do not fear when the heat comes or the year of the drought because they have roots beneath the surface that nourish them,” and so “they continue to bear fruit” in spite of what happens above ground. The creation accounts in Genesis take place in a garden.

Other images that come to mind: Jesus said, “Beware of false prophets . . you will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. . . thus you will know them by their fruits.”¹

So it's no surprise that while Jesus is walking with his disciples through the Garden of Gethsemane, with vines and olive trees all around him, he turns and says, “I am the true vine and my father is the vine grower . . Abide in me as I abide in you . . I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” In other words, God above is the gardener and there is nothing that brings more joy to the Lord than a human being fully alive, living a fruit-filled life. That only happens when you remain connected. Life flows through all those connected parts, the roots, the branches, the leaves, tendrils, and the fruit. Life requires connections.

A newspaper reporter interviewed a successful entrepreneur years ago. “How did you do it?” he asked. “How did you make all this money?” “I'm glad you asked,” said the entrepreneur. “Actually, it's a rather wonderful story. When my wife and I were married we started out with a simple roof over heads and some food in the pantry and about five cents between us. I took that nickel down to the grocery store, bought an apple and shined it up. Then I sold it for ten cents.” “What did you do then?” asked the reporter. “Well,” he said, “then I bought two more apples, shined them up and sold them for twenty cents.” Here the reporter was thinking he had a great human-interest story, a Horatio Algiers success story. “Then what?” he asked. “Then my father-in-law died and left us twenty million dollars,” said the businessman.

Now that man prospered, not because of his ingenuity, but because he was connected. We all know the value of networking. Online we may be part of LinkedIn, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, or some other network. We ask connected people to write letters of recommendation for us to accompany our college applications and job applications. We choose colleges based

¹ Matthew 7:15-20

upon the connections that will form for us so we may enter professions with connections already established. We know the value of connections! Joining a country club, or school board, or the city council, takes connections.

A few years ago, I visited the Flora Springs Vineyard in Napa Valley with several seminary presidents. Ted and Julie are the owners. It is a family-owned business that Julie's parents bought in the 1970s. Ted (her husband) became the horticulturalist. He must be pretty capable because he had recently was named "Grower of the Year" in the valley. They took us out to the vineyard to show us how to cut back a vine. One prunes a vine like one does roses and at a similar time of year when the plant is most dormant. 70% of the vine is pruned away and burned to prevent disease, the same as in the first century. The gardener cuts near the buds. Cane pruning is one form that allows the healthiest two canes to remain and all others are removed. Usually there is a trellis structure to support the canes in this case. Another form is spur pruning. It can take about 20 minutes per vine to prune. The point was clear: for new growth to occur in any living organism, pruning is necessary and it can seem drastic. Sometimes the Lord prunes things out of our lives in order for new growth to occur and it can be painful.

For those who walked by vineyards every day, Jesus used a metaphor of vines and branches to instruct them about the spiritual life. In essence he says to live a fruitful life one must be connected. We all know that, on some level. But Jesus goes farther. He says the truly fruitful life is the one that remains connected to him. And then he goes even farther and says, "Apart from me, you can do nothing!" It is vitally important to stay connected to Christ in order to realize our potential and live the fruitful life. "Remember that it is not you that supports the root but the root that supports you," writes Paul.

I've used this story before but it captures this idea of a different way of being rooted in life. As the fifth Assembly of the World Council of Churches was drawing to a close in Africa, the well-known anthropologist, Margaret Mead, rose to her feet and approached the microphone. She surveyed the gathered throng: 2,500 people, of many cultures and denominational labels, speaking hundreds of different languages. People ranging from a Ghanaian high court judge to a Memphis used car salesman, from the Archbishop of Canterbury to a tribesman from Northern Kenya who had walked for 3 days just to watch and listen and pray. Dr. Mead said,

"You people are a sociological impossibility. You have nothing in common – except your extraordinary conviction that Jesus Christ is the Savior of the world."

That simple conviction has been enough to motivate believers to share the good news of the gospel with others, sometimes at great personal risk and sacrifice. That simple conviction has been enough to motivate believers to create communities of worship and learning all over the world. That simple conviction has been enough for believers to build institutions of higher education to teach children, of all colors and abilities and backgrounds – how to read and write and add and subtract. That simple conviction has moved people to construct hospitals and clinics, retirement homes and facilities for those with disabilities, to care for those who can no longer care for themselves. It is a grand vision of community. A place where we become more than the sum of our parts! A place where we take our place at the table, where our name tag is waiting in front of our chair but so too are the name tags of those with whom we differ. It is a community known not for *uniformity*, but for the sociological impossibility of a *unity* that transcends all the other differences which throughout human history have separated people from one another.

The Apostle Paul, in Romans and Galatians and elsewhere, is arguing for a sociological impossibility. And at the heart of his argument he seems to believe that by connecting to this root, being grafted into Christ, Jews and Gentiles, men and women, children and the elderly, black and white, Native and immigrant, can become part of something that transcends their differences and creates something entirely new — the kingdom of God. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus."² We don't lose our particularity, but we gain a universality in perspective and outlook.

Between the years 1991 and 1995, the war in former Yugoslavia, ". . . increased the already oversized vocabulary of evil with the phrase 'ethnic cleansing,'" according to Dr. Miroslav Wolfe, a professor at Yale. In his book that I'm reading, *Exclusion and Embrace*, he argues that Christian faith has the capacity to embrace the other without demonizing them. We've seen the alternative, ethnic cleansing to drive out the other, only the "pure bloods," the pure culture can live in the land. "The result: a world without the other," he writes. "The price: rivers of

² Galatians 3:28

blood and tears.” Miroslav Wolfe is an ethnic Croatian. He writes, “I spent some six weeks in war-torn Croatia in the fall of 1992 — its territories occupied, its cities and villages destroyed, and its people killed and driven out. There it became clear to me what, in a sense, I knew all along: the problem of ethnic and cultural conflicts is part of a larger problem of identity and otherness.” The Book of Romans is struggling with the same issues as Paul reflects on the place of Jew and Gentile in God's unfolding drama.

It's the problem of identity and otherness. We've added to our vocabulary expressions like “cancel culture” and we tear down statues seeking to cleanse history of the unwanted past, whitewashing history books and sitting in moral judgment on those who preceded us. The greatest danger it seems to me is that we are overly confident in our own perspective. We think ourselves so morally superior. “If you don't agree with me, you should be cleansed from the church, or the political party, or the community, or the country.” Is this not one branch saying to the other branch, “I'm better than you are!”

“So do not become proud, but stand in awe. For if God did not spare the natural branches, perhaps he will not spare you. Note then the kindness and the severity of God,” writes Paul. “Remember that it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you.”

Let judgement begin with the household of God. If we're truly rooted in Christ, and grafted into the kingdom of God, why are we so sure of ourselves rather than humbly grateful for God's kindness to each and every one of us? Why do we feel so superior to others, in our nation, because of where our ancestors came from, or when they came, or what deck of the ship they came on? What difference does it make really? Every deck of this ship we are on at present is infected with COVID-19! We're all vulnerable. Every deck of this ship we are on is infected with the sin of arrogance, and cancel culture, and ethnic cleansing, and fear of the other. It is not a grand vision but a sad one. It is not our finest moment but a potentially tragic moment in our history. This week, Liberty University is one tragic example of that hubris. “Note then the kindness and severity of God.” Paul knew that it's not just how you act in the world but what you think about. Not just how you treat others but how you think about them, and how you think about yourself, your own identity, that matters.

God's unity is not what we might think. It is a gift. It comes more as a by-product than by constant attention to building unity. The community that is focused upon the mission of Jesus Christ begins to move toward addressing the needs of others and finds unity and community along the way.

With night vision, you can actually see things better if you don't look directly at it. It is in one's *peripheral* vision that the object comes into focus. Unity within the faith community comes into focus while reality better in the peripheral vision. The Church who is focused exclusively upon becoming more unified will never realize its dream. It will more likely attempt to become uniform and thus cease to be the Church of Jesus Christ.

There is an old story told about a station that was established on a dangerous seacoast in a place where many ships were wrecked due to the stormy seas and precarious coastline. Again and again, brave volunteers went out to rescue people from drowning. Often those who were saved joined the courageous, and dedicated, group of volunteers. As the group began to grow, they built new sheds to protect their boats and provide shelter for those who were rescued from the sea. Before long, they erected a building where they could be more comfortable and added a restaurant, some games rooms and a lounge for themselves. As the station grew in size and prestige, many more members joined. Time passed and the members hired workers to do the lifesaving, while they came to enjoy the club. Soon members began to express dissatisfaction with the inconvenience of having wet floors from the rescue efforts. At last, they held a meeting and decided to discontinue the lifesaving effort all together. Some members complained that they had abandoned their primary purpose, so they resigned and started a real lifesaving station down the coast. The story goes that you can visit that seacoast today in Australia and you will find a series of exclusive clubs, but no lifesaving stations anymore.

The Church is a lifesaving station and must never become a private club. But it is the nature of things to gravitate to where we are most comfortable, and to seek our own comfort rather than to embrace the purposes of God. It has been said that Jesus came not only to comfort the afflicted, but also to afflict the comfortable. It is the mission of the church, and our focus upon it, that will lead to greater unity in our community. As we, a community of faith, embrace the work that our Lord has called us to do, we will increasingly discover the surprise of being connected to one another (less isolated, less self-reliant and more connected and alive) across

the many differences that divide others. We will relate to one another across the age spectrum – generational differences will not impede our care for one another. Gender differences will be celebrated, and men and women will learn together how to live in community, dependent upon others. Racial and ethnic differences will not determine who we worship next to or with whom we enjoy coffee in the courtyard. Single people will find the church to be their extended family. Single parents will find the church to be a life-saving institution, where there is support for those who are raising their children alone. Those with disabilities will not feel excluded but will find the church to be one place where their needs are anticipated, and their presence is missed when they are not here.

God is leading us toward a new community and a new unity, centered in Jesus Christ where the needs of each are addressed by the resources of all, and where everyone matters and belongs. This is what it means to live in God's garden. Let's all take our part and do our share to build such a place. Whatever you can do to reach out and provide hospitality to others, to volunteer your time and talents to build up the community, and to share your treasure and resources to meet the needs and commitments of the church, offer to the whole with gratitude and generosity. It's more important than you know. We belong to one another because we belong to Jesus Christ: a sociological impossibility perhaps, but precisely what the world needs most – a new community created for the purpose of saving others, and in the process we find our own deepest needs met.

“Those who trust in the Lord — whose trust IS the Lord — are like trees “planted by the water . . .they do not fear when the heat comes or the year of the drought because they have roots beneath the surface that nourish them,” and so “they continue to bear fruit” in spite of what happens above ground.

“I am the vine,” says the Lord, “and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, and glorify God! . . .I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” Thanks be to God.