

Title: Loving Fruit

Let us pray.

Most holy, Lord God, you give us many gifts, including the fruit of the vine, may we, in our turn, give our gifts to you and others, rejoicing in your steadfast love and producing fruits of the Spirit, who with Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.

For much of my life, I just assumed that grapes grew on grape vines. Whenever I read John 15, I thought that when Jesus refers to branches and vines that they were synonymous. It was only after we moved to the Sierra foothills and observed vine pruning and spring growth that I realized that grape vines have branches where the grapes actually grow. This made Jesus' metaphor of being the true vine more meaningful, especially the pruning part.

When we lived in Utah, I was mainly a beer drinker. Getting wine required going to a state-owned liquor store and there are not many of them. Our friends discovered box wine and if we had wine, that is what we drank. The choice of wine was red or white without any thought or knowledge about variety.

The summer between my first and second years of seminary was spent doing Clinical Pastoral Education at Napa State Hospital. On Fridays, the Lutheran and Episcopalian interns took off early and we headed up the Napa Valley. That was when I first experienced a tasting room and better wine than what was found in a box.

When we moved to Placerville, we not only had many wineries available, but we could actually observe vines during the year. We could see the fruit turning from green to purple. We could see the leaves turn color in the fall, the barren branches in the winter, and the pruned vines in the spring, and then the branches growing and leafing out again. Jesus was able to see this in the Nazareth area, too.

We have availed ourselves to the fruit of the vine, principally El Dorado County wine. We have visited the Shenandoah Valley, but they charged for tasting. Now, they are starting to do that too in El Dorado County. A few

years ago, Suzie got me a wine making kit for Christmas. In retrospect, I think it was as much for her as it was for me. I have a red blend from Dry Creek grapes of Sonoma County fermenting at home right now.

The carpenter's son probably never worked on a farm. Yet Jesus was familiar with wheat and grape farming and shepherding. Galilee was and is the breadbasket of the Levant. Modern Israel exports food to Europe. When the Bible describes Israel as a land flowing with milk and honey, it is likely talking more about Galilee than the rest of Israel. The Israel highlands have agriculture but the soil is not as rich as the Galilee area. The highlands' soil is better for grazing.

Jesus says he is the true vine. I'm not sure what Jesus means by this, but I assume he is saying that all people are like vines, but he is the only true vine, which would imply that there is something false about the rest of us. That is not very comforting, but probably accurate.

God is the vine grower or farmer. What Jesus says next is about the fruit of the vine. If Jesus has a branch that bears no fruit, God removes it. I can't imagine Jesus not bearing fruit, but Jesus is expanding the metaphor. Fruit is used oftentimes to represent achievements or accomplishments, usually done for someone else. Perhaps, as Jesus is approaching the cross, Jesus is saying that the fruit of his ministry was successful because God kept Jesus free from what would not be useful for others in what Jesus did and said.

Even for those branches that bear fruit, there is a time when God pruned them so that, there would be more fruit. God had a direct hand in making sure that Jesus would have a productive ministry. I don't know how that would work and perhaps, Jesus could find no way to describe it, except to use a vine metaphor.

One of the fruits of this effort was that the disciples were cleansed by Jesus' words. Jesus doesn't mention Judas and that may be because Judas had already left at this time. Jesus seems to be talking about this metaphor on the way to Gethsemane.

Being cleansed, the disciples are urged to abide in Jesus. The branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine. The disciples are the branches. Judas may be what was pruned. But there could be others who joined up as

disciples, but later decided to leave. John implies that this did happen earlier in his gospel. The disciples cannot bear fruit unless they abide in Jesus.

Jesus then gets explicit. Jesus is the vine and the disciples are the branches. A disciple is anyone who follows Jesus and strives to apply his teachings to the disciples' life. We are disciples, also.

If we abide with Jesus and Jesus in us, then we will bear much fruit. The ministries we have done, are doing, and will do are only possible because of Jesus' abiding presence. (And I might add Jesus' presence through the Holy Spirit.)

Jesus gets a little severe. Whoever does not abide in Jesus is pruned and thrown away where that one withers. Those branches are gathered and thrown into the fire. Jesus did not have to deal with California's burning regulations. Farmers tend to be very utilitarian. If something is not useful and is flammable, it is burned. The ground is too valuable to be used for stacking fruitless branches when it could be used for planting.

Jesus says that if we abide in him and he in us, whatever we ask will be done for us. I don't know about you, but I have prayed for things that I did not get. There are those who say that this saying is true and God will give us whatever we want. Do you want more money? Pray and it will be given to you. If you don't have it then you are not praying hard enough.

This prosperity gospel is a harsh gospel. If you don't get what you ask for it is not God's fault, it is yours. And it is your fault because you lack faith. The truth is if someone gets rich, then someone else gets poorer. The money supply does grow, but not so much that people get rich instantly through prayer. Someone must lose. These days, there are too many people losing. The people who are winning, for the most part, do not appear to me to be people that spend a lot of time praying.

This is a growing crisis in this country. The income gap is growing. My observation is that there are two principle reasons for this. One, the tax code favors the rich. Two, the weakening of unions has suppressed wages and benefits allowing executives to receive many more millions of dollars in salary and bonuses. There is a direct correlation between the decline of unions and the decline in our standard of living.

Unions were the spearpoint in giving us: child labor laws, the minimum wage, paid overtime, safe working conditions, and a living wage.

The income gap crisis has exacerbated the housing crisis in this state. More and more people are struggling to afford rent. Even though they are employed full-time, people end up living in their cars because they cannot afford rent. This is a growing problem in Los Angeles, the bay area, and growing in Sacramento. People are calling on the legislature to enact rent control, but that won't work. Each city and county can better evaluate what is good for them, rather than a statewide law.

In addition to the income gap, our housing situation is on the wrong side of simple economics, supply and demand. There is more demand than supply of housing in California. Part of the supply problem is choking hurdles and regulations by the state and the counties. El Dorado County charges exorbitant fees to build a house. If these regulations and ordinances were reduced or eliminated, housing contractors could build a house with a lower price tag, employing more workers and raising the standard of living for the middle class.

Some businesses have discovered that being partners with employees boosts production and job satisfaction. Loving our neighbor also applies to the workplace. Praying for money won't lift us up. Working together, with respect, lifts everyone up.

I'm only guessing here, but I believe that God does not respond to prayers of greed. God does respond to prayers seeking insight and solutions to our problems. Those solutions require that we do something. We are the branches. We can solve our problems when we abide with Jesus. Our actions are the worthy fruit.

God is glorified when we bear much fruit. The fruit that we bear can only be effective when it is done out of love. Meeting our needs at the expense of someone else is not love and it is not the gospel.

Thank you for those who signed up for ministries at the Ministry Fair. Some of you may not have been here after the 10:30 on that day. This never closes.

It is not a one-day event. Margaret is the keeper of the list. Please check with her if there is a place where you may bear fruit.

Being a Christian is not a passive attitude. We bear fruit out of the love that God has for us and how we reflect that love to those around us. After all, vines are not grown for their branches. They are grown for their fruit and I appreciate that very much. Through love, we are to bear fruit for the glory of God.

Text: **John 15:1–8** (NRSV)

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^a to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed^b by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^c my disciples. ¹

^a The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing#

^b The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing

^c or *be*

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version*](#). (1989). (Jn 15:1–8). Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers.