

1 John 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

John 15:1-8

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

Vines and Branches

John 15: 1-8

Over the last few weeks, as spring has tempted us, I have been working a little bit every day trying to clear the wild growth and brush on our property. I can't believe how fast it grows back, especially those black berry canes. It seems that every year I have to go back out and start all over again clearing and pruning to make sure the trees and other fruit bushes that I have will stay healthy and get enough sun. Jesus' words this morning have me thinking about pruning.

When I worked on a fruit farm many years ago, I remember one of my friends who was a farmer say, "you should never let a farmer prune his own trees". The reason being, that the farmer was afraid of cutting things back too far, afraid they might lose some fruit if they pruned too aggressively. And so you should hire someone who isn't too invested in the product and can really prune the trees and bushes the way they need to be pruned. It helps the trees stay healthy and in the long run, they produce more fruit.

I have to admit that is the extent of my farming knowledge about pruning. I was never very good at it. What I do know, is that particularly on fruit trees, there are branches that are called suckers that grow straight up from the main branches and all they do is suck the energy out of the tree. They don't bear fruit and it is important to

cut them off before they overwhelm the tree. Farmers are busy people and understand about pruning and how it makes fruit-bearing plants healthier and more productive. Jesus' community knew this too. Being a predominantly agricultural society, they understood what Jesus was saying and they probably understood what he meant when he referred to himself as the True Vine. His listeners would have known exactly what he was talking about. They would've been quick to make the connection: Jesus was the new Israel, the one through whom God was establishing a new covenant. No longer would the makeup of God's chosen people be determined by their race and their Jewish ancestry, it would hinge upon their relationship to God through Jesus Christ.

It was a bold statement reminding everyone that we have all been grafted onto the true Vine and are now branches of God. But still, I have to wonder what to do with this passage from Jesus about being branches and about being pruned by God. What does that mean really? We, of course, have to recognize that this is metaphorical language. Jesus is using a grape growing vine or vineyard as an image to make a point. He's done it before. And I suppose we have to keep in mind the community John's Gospel was written to, who have undergone a lot of losses and metaphorical pruning's in their own lives as a Christian Community, distinctly separate from their Jewish brothers and sisters. And I guess if we are honest, we have experienced some pruning too.

So, I am wondering about pruning. We already know what that means when we prune plants and vines. But what does it mean for us to be pruned? Even Jesus says that God removed every branch in him that didn't bear fruit and I wonder what he meant by that. If even Jesus acknowledges that he had vines in him that needed removing, then how much more must we? It certainly has me wondering what Jesus needed pruned from his life. I can't imagine. It makes me wonder if he isn't referring to his time in the desert when he was tempted to claim power and fame for himself. Or maybe all those times that he was tempted to be the kind of king his followers thought he would be. That with God's strength he chose to do his father's will rather than follow the path of self-success. Perhaps that's when Jesus experienced what John wrote about when he said, "God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us."

We should note that the pruning is not meant as punishment, but so that the plant can be even more fruitful. Pruning sounds destructive, but it is actually creative. And when God prunes us it isn't punishment. He prunes us in order to make us more like Jesus.

Several years ago if you headed south on old 421 going towards Wilkesboro from Boone, there was a house right along the road where the owner had sculpted his bushes to look exactly like two comfy chairs and a couch. It was really quite impressive. They kept it that way for years and we would always point it out to the kids whenever we drove by. By trimming the bushes regularly, they were able to shape the plants to look the way they wanted them to.

And maybe that's what God does for us as well. That there are things in our lives that distract us, and like suckers on the vine or tree branch, they take away our energy and our joy. And God gives us courage and strength to let those things go if they keep us from doing His will for our lives. Maybe that's what it means to be pruned. I know I have things that I've let be pruned from my life over the years as I abide in Him. Jealousy, anger, a need for attention and fame, perfectionism, lust, apathy, to name a few. How about you? Can you think of how you have been metaphorically pruned so that you become more Christ-like? What are the suckers that keep draining the life out of you and keep you from bearing good fruit? Jealousy? Hatred and prejudice? Working too much? Unhealthy relationships with people, or food, or addicting substances? Your computer,

iPhone, tablet, Netflix, Game of Thrones? These things can distract and tie us up in ways that we have no time to abide in Jesus. No time to sit silently or even remember that God is with us throughout our days.

We are easily disconnected, not only from each other but from the Holy Divine Presence of God. We live in an age where we think we are so connected. I have so many supposed “friends” on Facebook, but I don’t think they really know who I am and I certainly don’t know all of them. Many of them are friends of friends who I never even knew in the first place. And yet, we feel like we are connected to this incredible network when in reality we are sitting alone at our computer or iPhone completely isolated from any real community.

And in like fashion our spiritual lives and growth need to be connected to something as well. We don’t do well in isolation and Jesus’ words this morning remind us that we belong to the vine. That we belong to each other. That we all belong to God who is the vinegrower. The vinegrower who guides our growth and prunes where needed that we might produce fruit for the kingdom.

That we need to stay grounded and rooted in Him so that we might live lives that reflect the fruit that God desires. Fruits of forgiveness and compassion. Fruits of mercy and grace. Fruits of courage and joy, unity and peace. These are the fruits of love that are being perfected in us all if we take our relationship with God seriously and personally. Paul speaks of these in Galatians chapter 5 verse 22 where he says, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” And these are working in us as we stay connected to God, or as Jesus and John put it, “to abide in Him.”

Abide in Him. That’s really the secret, isn’t it? Abiding in Jesus. How do we do that? Well, one way I found is by taking time for daily prayer. It doesn’t have to be some long drawn out prayer but maybe one as simple as the one Anne Lamont uses where she starts out by saying, “Help!” Followed by “Thanks” ending with “Wow!” Its just like talking to your best friend. “Just checking in today and thanking you for my life and all the blessings.” And then sit still and listen. When my voice students would have trouble finding a note I would always tell them to not try to find it by singing louder, but to listen louder, and you will hear the note in the music. Sometimes this is the most important part of prayer. Listen more, talk less.

Reading the Word. If you are unaccustomed to reading the Bible begin with the Psalms or one of the Gospels. I usually begin with a couple of the psalms where I can always find connections to my life. Who doesn’t connect with the 23rd Psalm or Psalm 27 where the psalmist says: *“The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I fear? The Lord is the stronghold of my life; of whom shall I be afraid?”* I’ve printed out a daily devotional for you if you want to get started with a daily reading program.

Stay connected to the family of God. Spend time with your brothers and sisters who share the journey with you. Most of us have one or two friends who know just where we are in our journey and just what we struggle with. It’s important to have someone you can share with and wrestle with the challenges of being a disciple of Jesus in this time and place. And it’s good to know that you have a safe place to share your love of God and also to share your doubts and fears. This is the place for that and so it’s good to be together.

Serving others is also another way to stay rooted and connected to Jesus. This was his life’s ministry which he calls us too. And when we serve others in his name, we are always blessed in ways that are beyond our understanding. There is a connection that comes with serving that brings deep joy and casts out fear and doubt.

And perhaps one of the most powerful ways we stay connected is by our baptism that unites us with the water of forgiveness and Holy Communion, a meal that reminds us of Jesus’ life, death, and resurrection. That connects us not only to Him but to each other as we share a simple meal of bread and cup. It reminds us that we are a part of the Vine and one with the Vinegrower.

There was a story I shared before about an artist and scientist named Sam Van Aken. His story sounds like something out of Dr. Seuss, but he developed a tree that blooms in pink, fuchsia, purple and red in the spring and that is capable of bearing 40 different kinds of fruit. No, it's not genetic engineering. Van Aken used an age-old technique called grafting to attach branches from 40 different kinds of stone fruit onto a single tree. (A stone fruit is any fruit that has a stone or a pit in it in case you were wondering.) It's called the "Tree of 40 Fruits."

He's an artist. So the whole project really began with this idea of creating a tree that would blossom in these different colors and would bear these multitude of fruit. But he soon discovered that it was actually pretty hard to find so many distinct varieties of stone fruit in New York. But then he came across the New York State Agricultural Experimentation Station. "It was the largest orchard of its kind in the Northeast, perhaps even east of the Rockies," he says.

The 3-acre plot contained all sorts of varieties of stone fruit, he says. "And they all had these amazingly different tastes." That's when he started to understand the history behind these fruits, he says. "Then [the project] really became about preserving some of these antique and heirloom varieties."

The state wanted to close the operation down due to a lack of funding, so Van Aken purchased it in 2008. His 16 trees around the country are composed of mainly antique and native stone fruit varieties, including peaches, plums, apricots, and nectarines. Van Aken says he's worked with 250 varieties of stone fruit at this point. The process of building up these trees has taken years and a lot of patience. He starts with what's called a stock plant. He then inserts small, budding branches from other trees at strategic points throughout the stock tree. He tapes these grafts in place and lets them heal and bond with their new base over the winter months. If all goes well, the grafts will start to grow in the spring. The technique has been around for thousands of years, Van Aken says. "It appears on hieroglyphs in Egypt."

And isn't this the good news of the gospel, the ongoing restorative work of God through Jesus, that we are all grafted onto the tree of life? The tree of 40 fruits, the diverse and beautiful tree of the kingdom of God?

Because we too, as we abide in God, are grafted into this vine, this vineyard, this vine that is Jesus our Lord and Savior. So, I encourage you to remember that He is the vine and we are the branches. He is the tree and we are the fruit. (*All kinds of fruit!*) That if we abide in him and he abides in us, if we stay awake to where Jesus is already working in the world, if we open our hearts to his leading, if we let go of the things that separate us from God and one another, there will be such a vineyard as you have never imagined. The vines and trees will be covered with the fruits of love and compassion, justice and mercy, grace and forgiveness. They will be so heavy they will bow low to the ground that all may eat of it and be satisfied! Anything will be possible! Thanks be to God. Amen.