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Title: Branching Out

Date: May 13 & 14, 2017

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Text: John 15:1-8

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John 15:1-8

1 "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 to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed 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 my disciples."



Last week, Randy sang a kid's song in his sermon. After reading today's scripture, I thought of this kid's folk song, which a mother might sing to her child:

"There once was a tree, a pretty little tree, the prettiest little tree that you ever did see. Oh, the tree in a hole, and the hole in the ground, and the green grass grew all around, all around. And the green grass grew all around."

It continues like that: "Now on this twig, there was a leaf. The prettiest little leaf that you ever did see. Oh, the leaf on the twig, and the twig on the bough, and the bough on the branch, and the branch on the limb, and the limb on the tree, and the tree in the hole, and the hole in the ground, and the green grass grew all around, all around. The green grass grew all around."

The leaf grows not on the tree, but on the twig. The fruit of the vine grows not on the vine itself, but on the branches. The hearers of John's gospel may not have known that folk song, but they would have been familiar with the prophet Isaiah's "Song of the Vineyard," which compared God to vineyard owner and Israel, God's people, to the vines themselves. "Let me sing for my beloved my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill" (Isa. 5:1) it begins.

A few years ago, Kyle and I visited some vineyards out in California. Rough job, but somebody has to do it. We learned about viticulture, the study and production of grapes, and how much work goes into planning, preparing the land, and terracing. I literally took

notes because I knew this was such a biblical practice, and I would better understand the stories written about Palestine around 10,000 years ago to Jesus' time.

Then and now, the exacting, exhausting, and expensive investment of a vineyard was supposed to last for a good long while for its owner. It is understandable that one who gave so much attention and resources to produce a crop would expect an exceptional return for his [or her] efforts.

However, Isaiah's song was an argument against Israel, for God's people had not produced a good crop. They had failed in their faithfulness. They had not been fruitful. Centuries later, the church John was writing to *had* been faithful disciples, and he seeks to give them hope and encouragement... God is still the vine grower, and Jesus the vine. The church members are the branches.

I am not a viticulturist (grape scientist or vine grower), or even much of a gardener, but I understand that in order to produce the best grapes or flowers or vegetables, the plants must be pruned. The Greek word for this means cleansed. When I was young, I watched my mom "deadhead" blooms from daylilies in our front yard, wondering why she must take off the blooms, but now I understand. The plant must be cut back to produce even more blossoms.

We are just now ready to plant, in some cases, 100s of flowers, in the middle of May, but taking care of a garden requires year-round care.

God certainly recognizes this, and in fertile ground, Jesus was planted that we might grow from him. And the church did grow even during stormy weather and droughts of faith. The hearers of John's words had already lost their temple, as it had been destroyed. Jesus knew this would happen, but the temple was not the vine. Jesus was. Jesus is. And those who abide in him, remain connected to him, continue to flourish. The ancient church had to cut off the branches that were harmful. The rest stayed intact, bearing the fruit.

Now the fruit of the vine is not the same as the fruits of the spirit that Paul writes about, although those are helpful in living out the fruit of witnessing in love. Bearing fruit is living testimony as disciples. Followers of Christ do not bear fruit in order to become disciples. The fruit reveals who disciples are.

In John's age, revealing that one was a follower of Jesus, a Christian, was not an easy task to do. Christians were persecuted, families were torn apart, and livelihoods lost due to a profession of faith. The church needed reassurance that God would remain with them even as the church took a different shape, after the death of Jesus, apart from the temple. And reassurance was what they received. "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."

The church can do nothing on its own apart of its faithfulness to the gospel. The church can do nothing if its members try to go their separate ways, do their own thing. Oh, but we try.

Society tells us that we need to pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. We made our bed and now we must lie in it. We can dig ourselves out of the depths of depression or addiction all by ourselves, right? We just have to have enough willpower, or work harder, or pray more. In an individualistic culture, we struggle to ask for help, as if it is a sign of weakness.

Now, this is a burden I bear. I like to think that I can do everything on my own. I am a strong, smart, independent, woman, just like my Momma. Hear me roar.

I can do everything by myself. (I am raising a daughter just like this, too. Apparently, it runs in the family.) I can carry heavy loads. "Do you need some help? No thanks, I've got it. See my muscle?" I can work a full-time job outside the home and be a full-time mother. We can have it all, right? Well...no. Not without help. Not apart from the vine. Branches that are removed from the source bear no fruit. And branches need to be pruned, to be cleansed.

The Greek word for prune is also the root word of catharsis: an emotional release, the purging of the emotions or relieving of emotional tensions, discharge of pent-up emotions so as to result in the alleviation of symptoms or the permanent relief of the condition.

At the end of a semester, high school, or college career, we might find it cathartic to make compost of our coursework. At the end of a relationship, some might find an emotional release in tossing out reminders of the love gone wrong. For those of us constantly connected, on-call 24 hours a day, it's a relief to turn off cell phones and *not* check email for an entire day or even an hour. Taking a hoe to weeds in the garden might alleviate the stress in our lives as well as the stress on the plants we hope will grow. After a season of eating sweets, we might abstain and only ingest healthy options to cleanse our bodies. For those who struggle with addiction, detox is an important step in ridding toxins and getting clean. Leaving full-time work outside the home for a part-time gig while parenting young children may rid one of the guilt and anxiety. Allowing your spouse to call your mother to come over and watch the baby while you get your sermon written (which happened on more than one occasion back in the day) results in a rejuvenating deep breath.

And coming to church on Mother's Day may be life-giving and sigh-producing at the same time. "We are all meant to be mothers of God," according to Meister Eckhart, embodying the divine within and without. Today we celebrate with biological, step-, adopted, foster mothers, mothers-in-law, mothers-to-be, and grandparents, dads, and others who are like mothers. So much fruit is born in the womb-bearer and child-rearer. I personally give thanks for my mom, who is here, my daughter who made me a mom, my mother-in-law and her mother, the fantastic grandmothers I had, my sister, and all the wonderful women in my life who have shaped my very being and my faith.

But the family tree of faith includes more than one branch.

For some, this day is for pruning, making a cathartic release of emotions. Not all of us sitting here are biological mothers. Yes, we all have them, but many are not raised by them. This day may be painful if you were raised by an abusive mother, cast out when you came out, desperately wish to be a mother but cannot, have carried life within but know the loss of a child, through miscarriage, death, abortion, adoption, abandonment. Perhaps your mom is no longer part of your life, is imprisoned, or lives eternally with God, having passed from this life to the next. Loss is hard whether it happened 2 weeks or 20 years ago. Or maybe you are a woman who is not ready or wishes not to be a biological mother, which culture has deemed strange or improper. Mother's Day brings up so many emotions. On a day when Hallmark and restaurants celebrate moms of all kinds, we must prune the vine of assumptions that the bearing and rearing of children is the only way to grow the family tree of faith. For it isn't.

This is not an easy endeavor, but it necessary. The good news is that we don't do it alone. In fact, we can't. A community is vital to supporting the growth of one's body, mind, and spirit. Although we may branch out on our own, we remain connected to the vine, or trunk and roots. And we need to be pruned regularly.

The church is community that gathers for worship, faith formation, fellowship, and mission. If only the preacher showed up, we wouldn't have church. If only the communion elements were prepared but there was no one to partake, would the Body of Christ be shared? If the doors were unlocked but no one to greet visitors and members or invite them in, would we be a welcoming place of worship? If the instruments were on the stage but no one to play or sing, would we praise God with a joyful noise? If we gathered food and baskets at Easter and stockings at Christmas, and no one delivered them, would children be served? If 70 children showed up but no teachers tended the nursery and classrooms, would faith be formed? But these of course, are things as a church, we, you, do well. These are branches that bear much fruit. (And you know, women have been fertilizing the roots of faith, sustaining growth since the beginning. From Sarah and Miriam, Moses' sister, to Mary, to whom the risen Christ first appeared, women have made the community of faith bloom and grow.

Some churches struggle because they have held on to beliefs and practices that no longer bear fruit. This could be because "the way we've always done it" just *doesn't do it any more* in building up the kingdom of God.

We don't like change, and if change means cutting off part of ourselves, that is even harder to deal with. But it must be done. As the church, we must continually reevaluate what works and what doesn't. If attendance isn't what it used to be, maybe we need to try something else. This pruning may produce more fruit, or it might not. It is not failure to try something that may not work. It is failure when we let the branches take over the vine, choking out the possibility for fruit. It is ok to deadhead.

When the church tries to remain relevant, it's important to tweak the twigs. We're doing this in board meetings and elsewhere, discerning how best to serve God and others. This is not an individual effort. It takes everyone to come together to listen and to share.

When God's creation is destroyed by our selfish and irresponsible ways, it takes not just one person recycling her Coke can, but the entire community to begin to enact earth-centered behaviors. Participation in care for God's created, which includes our sisters and brothers whose names we know not and whose lives are on the other side of the tracks and the globe, is not a one-person, one-congregation endeavor. The big C Church, women AND men AND children of all genders must cut off the branches of our evil ways, war and hate and hunger and homelessness and poverty and oppression to allow for sustaining growth. When a family has a child, regardless of identity or biology or means, it takes the family tree of faith to love, support, challenge, and bring her up in the hope of resurrection. Geist Christian bears much fruit!

As the branches are intimately attached to the vine and the vine intimately connected to the vine grower, so is the church connected to God and all of God's creation. One does not exist on his or her own. The African proverb reminds us, "Because we are, I am."

This is good news, indeed. We are interdependent, responsible to and reliant upon one another. When we have Christ as the source of our strength and nourishment, we witness to God's love, bearing the fruit that reveals us as Disciples of Christ. Thanks be to God!