



Through the Grapevine
John 15:1-8
Preached FCCW May 3, 2015

Did you know that today is a holiday?

Don't panic, guys. You didn't forget that it's Mothers Day.

That's next Sunday, so you can relax.

It's not Memorial Day.

It's not even Cinco de Mayo.

There's still dos more days until that holiday.

Today is Rogation Day.

Which is a holiday that existed for centuries before
any of those other May holidays were created.

But you won't find a Rogation Day section
in your local Hallmark store.

About the closest thing to a Rogation Day greeting
that you'll ever see

would be one of those bumper stickers that say,
"No Farms, No Food."

Because Rogation Day used to be the Sunday
when clergy in rural communities
would lead their congregation out of the church
to visit the farms and fields of the parish,
stopping at each one to ask God's blessing on them.

The root of the word Rogation is the Latin verb,
"rogare" - which means, to ask.

On Rogation Day, people asked God to do something
that was beyond human power to accomplish on their own.

To provide fruitfulness for the land
and protection from calamities to the crops.

The fact that most of us here this morning
might not know about Rogation Day
says something about how much the distance has grown between
21st century folks and our appreciation of how much
the land is our source of life.

We get little reminders about the importance of
our relationship to the earth
when, say, a drought in California jacks up the price of almonds,
or a cold snap in Florida makes citrus fruit

as expensive as prime rib.

But in between we tend to take the land for granted.

People in Jesus' day couldn't afford that kind of oversight.

For them, drought equaled famine,

and a blight on the crops meant starvation.

Which is why Jesus had so much success teaching them

about spiritual truths using agricultural metaphors

that they easily could relate to,

like shepherds and gardeners.

Or, like vines and branches.

On the night before his death,

Jesus told his disciples that he was the "true vine"

and that they, and those who would come

to believe in him through them,

were branches of that vine.

The vine was a powerful symbol to the people of Judah.

The face of the great Temple was adorned

with the imagery of vines bearing grapes.

Israel was thought of as the vine that God had planted,

the vineyard that God tended.

A vine that was meant to produce the fruit

of justice and righteousness.

To be a branch of this vine called Israel

was to know the security of belonging to God's chosen people.

But to be cut off from the vine,

to be shunned by the community

and declared unclean

was to be forsaken by God.

Which is exactly what would happen
to the first Christians - who were Jews -
but who were ostracized and excommunicated
from their synagogues for following Jesus.
Now Jesus was saying that he was the true vine.
And they, his disciples, were the branches.
In other words, their relationship to God
did not depend on their relationship to
the vine known as Israel.
It was dependent on their relationship to him.
That's something we all need to be reminded of as Christians.
That being a Christian means more than
believing in a certain religion.
It means being in a specific relationship.
The relationship with God that is possible through Jesus.
Not a casual relationship.
Jesus said it is as intimate as the union
between a vine and its branches.
As with any intimate relationship,
this relationship will change the person you are.
Jesus called this change bearing fruit.
That fruit will look different from one person's life to another.
But a fruitful life will include deeds of
righteousness, justice, reconciliation and forgiveness.
These are virtues that don't typically come naturally or easily
as far as it depends on us.
Thankfully, it doesn't all depend on us.
Jesus said, "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit

unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me."

That means there is something about this relationship to Jesus
that empowers us to become more than we ever could be on our own.

The good folks who celebrated Rogation Days of yore
did so in acknowledgement that there are forces in this world,
that our lives depend on,
but over which we have no control.

Like the fruitfulness of the land that feeds us.
Which provided a good incentive for asking God's help.

There are many forces in life that get in the way of
our bearing fruit that glorifies God.

Forces over which you and I are powerless.

It turns out that people and vines share a lot in common.

If you observe a vine you will notice that
as its branches grow farther and farther
away from the vine that is its life-source,
the more those branches have to rely on
something else to support them.

The branches seek out anything that
they can attach themselves to and once they do,
their future growth is determined by what
they have fastened themselves to.

When people grow away from the source
of their spiritual life in Jesus
they are prone to find something else
to which they attach themselves.

Eventually, those attachments can become

what we build our lives on

instead of the true life that Jesus offers.

Are there ambitions or objects, experiences or relationships,
that your life has been built on?

Maybe at the expense of the fruitful kind of life

that only comes through the grapevine of your relationship to Jesus?

Jesus says that God prunes the branches

so that they can cease from producing "dead heads"

and bear more fruit instead of withering on the vine.

Are there places needs in your life that could use some pruning
in order to make it more fruitful?

Is there anything that needs to be trimmed to make room
for deepening your relationship with Jesus?

Is there anything you need to be detached from
in order for you to be more deeply rooted
in the life that Jesus offers?

It's no coincidence, that when Jesus shared
a last meal with his disciples,
he offered them the life that can only be found in him
by inviting them to drink from a cup
that was filled with the fruit of the vine.

Jesus said if we abide in him and he abides in us
we can ask for - we can "rogare"- anything
and it will be given to us.

Not because he is some genie,
and our wishes are his commands.

But in the sense that he is eager to answer our prayers,
when those prayers are to be more fruitful branches of the vine.

When we are as closely linked to Jesus
as the branches are to the vine that gives them life,
what God wants, and what we want,
will converge to become one and the same purpose:
to produce a bountiful harvest of a fruit called love.

Let's pray: Lord, lead us to attach ourselves securely to that which keeps us firmly connected to you, the true vine, so that through that grapevine we will have fullness of life, and all that we need to bear fruit in your name. Amen