

Fruit of the Vine

John 15:1-8 and 1 John 4:7-21

Years ago, Sue and I spent a week in Napa Valley, California, along with another couple. One day we all visited a winery, even though only the husbands had any interest in wine. Because, who goes to Napa Valley and doesn't experience at least one winery, right?

On the last night that Jesus would have to spend with his disciples before his arrest and execution Jesus made use of winemaking terminology in an effort to prepare his disciples to carry on his ministry when he was gone. Many passages in the Old Testament, and even some of the parables Jesus told, had to do with vineyards. The disciples would have been familiar with scriptural references to Israel as the "vineyard of the Lord" and God as the vine grower who sought to produce good fruit from them.

So, on this night Jesus framed his final lessons to them concerning fruitful discipleship in wine-producing language. He said, "I am the vine and 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 point Jesus was making was that even when he was no longer physically present to them, he would be spiritually nearby. They could rely on that presence to guide and empower them for effective ministry.

The first way that Jesus would make them fruitful can be summed up in the old real estate axiom, "location, location, location." It's no accident that some of the best wines in the world come from Napa Valley. Napa Valley has a just about perfect combination of climate, soil, and terrain ideally equipped for growing **wine** grapes. It would be almost impossible for Napa Valley to *not* produce exceptional wine. Israel, with its temperate, Mediterranean climate and soil also lends itself to fine wine making. Jesus told the disciples, "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." That word "abide" is related to the word "abode"; which is a dwelling place or a home. He explained that the quality of our lives as disciples depends on where we are planted. Those who make themselves at home in a relationship with Jesus, and welcome Jesus to make his home within them, become something much more than they could ever have been on their own. They become like a branch that, through its connection to the vine, are able to produce the choicest of fruit.

How do we abide in Jesus? One way, is what we are doing this moment; worshiping. Praying, Praising God and being fed by God's Word connect us to the Vine that nourishes us so that we may bear good fruit. But an hour or so a week of connecting to the Vine is not enough to sustain our faith any more than watering your garden once a week will produce healthy plants. Abiding in Jesus the Vine calls us to daily spiritual practices of prayer and delving into God's Word, preferably with the guidance of good devotional readings that help us to relate what the Bible says to real life and avoid misinterpreting what we read. Without an intentional abiding in the vine that is Jesus we are less likely to bear good fruit in his name.

Jesus mentioned a second important ingredient of producing good spiritual fruit in our lives. He said that every branch that that bears fruit needs pruning to bear even more fruit. Any gardener will tell you that cutting back on some parts of a plant will have the effect of promoting more vigorous growth in the long run. The same applies to the grapes grown to produce wine. If the branches of the vine are allowed to spread in all directions, the nutrients from the soil that flow through the vine aren't sufficient to nurture the full potential of the fruit on the branches. Which results in inferior grapes and lackluster wine.

During our tour of the Napa winery, we saw workers among the rows of grapevines, inspecting and pruning in order to encourage the quality, not the quantity of the grapes that grew there. As Jesus' hands and feet in the world, it is incumbent on us to examine where the energy of our lives is being directed. What interests and activities could stand some pruning to create space for our connection to the vine to flower and bring forth the best fruit possible? Most of us—clergy included—are spread so thin that the truly important things of the Spirit can easily slide down the ladder of our daily priorities.

The last point for us to consider as fruit bearing disciples is perfection. Napa Valley wineries will tell you that their product is pure perfection. That's not the kind of perfection I'm talking about. It's not the perfection of flawlessness. It's the perfection that the First Letter of John is talking about when it says, "If we love one another, God lives in us, and God's love is perfected in us." The Greek word that is translated there as "perfected" has more of the sense of being *matured*. Like the way the fruit of the vine is at its best when it has reached maturity as a result of the care that the vine grower has lavished on it.

What that kind of perfection looks like in us is an increasing reflection of the love God has shown us in the ways that we show love to one another. As it says in this passage, "We love because God first loved us. Those who say "I love God, and hate their brothers and 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."

When the love that God has shown to us in Jesus matures in the form of our extending that love to others, God is surely glorified.

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