

Sermon for Sunday, July 28, 2024

Philippians 1:9-11

Luke 6:43-45

John 15:1-15

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable to you Oh Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today we begin our final sermon series for the summer: broadly titled "The Deep Life of Overflow." The intent of this preaching series is to encourage you to focus on your spiritual life and growth. This series will help you answer the question, "How can we grow deeper spiritually?" Cultivating an ongoing and deepening relationship with God is core to our identity as disciples of Jesus. If we want to be a congregation that has a wide canopy that is able to offer healthy, nourishing fruit to our neighbors in need, then we must devote time to cultivating deep roots in our relationship with God.

The Scriptural focus for today's sermon is the first 8 verses of John, chapter 15. Jesus spoke these words 2000 years ago to an audience whose life experiences were much different than ours. However, since we hold this book (*hold up a Bible*) to be inspired by God then these words continue to hold value for our lives. Verse by verse, we are going to consider what Jesus' words mean

- *Verse 1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.* God the father is the one with ultimate oversight over the vineyard. God is in charge. Jesus is the vine that God planted and each of us are branches coming off that vine. Think for a moment about any plant or tree. Most typically the plant or tree has a primary stalk or stem and all the branches come off of that primary stalk. What happens if a branch is broken clean off? Every leaf on the branch withers and dries up because no water or nutrients can reach the leaves. The branch dies.
- Some years ago Mark and I planted a flowering crab tree in a garden at our Rochester home. It bloomed beautifully but then deer came and in a quest to reach the upper blossoms snapped off the tree about three feet above the ground. As it happened there was still some unbroken bark and wood on one side. Rather than remove the tree we repositioned the trunk and wrapped the wound very tightly with string hoping that the tree would heal and survive.

- *Verse 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.* We would certainly have removed the crabapple tree if it had died. There was no point in having a dead tree in the garden. As gardeners we understand the need to remove dead trees, shrubs, and plants. But this is a hard verse to hear when we make a direct comparison of a branch to a person. But Jesus does this in this teaching and so we must as well. Yes, there will come a time of judgement when the vine grower and master gardener will examine the branch and consider whether any fruit has been produced. Our master gardener will determine whether or not there is a place for us; whether or not we need to be removed. But let me also say candidly that until our very last breath there is always a chance for a branch to bear good fruit; always.
- *Verse 2 continues: Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.* Our Rochester home also had two apple trees when we moved onto the property. In our early years there we didn't know much about fruit trees. At first the trees didn't produce many apples. Over time we learned that in order for these trees to bear fruit they needed to be pruned. Once we started pruning them we had fruit galore: sometimes more than we could possibly make use of. Like it or not, pruning may be necessary in our lives.
- *Verse 3: You have already been [pruned] cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.* The Greek word for prune or pruning can also mean to cleanse. Translators don't like to apply the word prune to humans so in verse 3 they opt to use the word *cleansed*. Trouble is that in doing so the listener loses the gist of the metaphor that Jesus is making. The best way for us to think about this teaching by Jesus is to focus on the idea that we have *already* been cleansed or pruned. God has acted and shaped us into branches of the vine that will bear fruit.
- *Verse 4: Abide in me as I abide in you [because] Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.* Back to the crabapple tree: To our surprise and delight our damaged crabapple tree survived and healed. It made it in part because there was still a way for the upper branches to receive the water and nutrients needed for survival through the unbroken wood and bark. Mark and I also played a part as we provided a structure for healing to occur. Eventually the break healed and new wood and bark grew.

- It is at this point that we start to see how these verses connect to our sermon series theme. Jesus is asking us to abide with him; to stick close to him; to remain connected to him so that we can bear fruit. And to be clear: the fruit that we bear will occur naturally. We don't have to work hard at it. If we simply behave in a manner that is consistent with the way the master gardener created us and then act with love and respect for the people around us the fruit will appear.
- *Verse 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.* In this verse Jesus is reiterating the points that he made earlier. He emphasizes his place as primary, as the vine. Then secondarily he reminds us that we are branches. We are not the main stem and we cannot bear fruit if we are not connected to Jesus. As long as we remain connected to the vine; as long as we abide with Jesus, we will bear fruit. As we live in an "abiding way" attached to the vine of Jesus there will be times when we find ourselves in the right place at the right time to take actions that make a positive difference in the world. Actions that bear fruit.
- *Verse 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.* Once again we come to an uncomfortable verse. It is pretty clear that those who do not remain connected to the main vine, to Jesus, are going to be abandoned. But I would also remind you of two points;
  - First that the vine grower is in charge. The vine grower makes the decisions about what happens to those that no longer abide with Jesus. Judgment is not our job. Rather our job is to act with love and kindness towards all people so that they might come to realize that remaining connected to Jesus is beneficial to their life. For God, as the master gardener, is always capable of repairing the wound between the vine and the branch.
  - Secondly Jesus taught that we have already been pruned or cleansed. We are branches of the vine and while additional pruning may occur, pruning which may inhibit our growth for a time, we are always a part of the vine. We have nothing to fear.
- *Verse 7: If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* I must

say this sounds pretty risky on God's part. We can ask for whatever we wish? And it will be done for us? Wowser! God is making a commitment to accomplish anything we ask for? Now, what do we do about the many seemingly unanswered prayers of this world? There are no simple or easy answers. But there is one prayer that never fails: "thy will be done." If we maintain our connection to the vine, to Jesus, we will come to see God's action in the world. We will come to understand that it's not my personal will that is to be done, but God's will that is to be done. We may even be privileged enough to recognize how God's will **is** being accomplished. Sometimes we might even be called upon to be participants in God's action to accomplish God's will in the world.

- *Verse 8: My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* And maybe this last verse is the best response we can put forward in answer to the mystery of the hard things that occur in our world. Maybe we bring glory to God when we stand in faith in spite of the horrors that we witness. That somehow when we remain faithful even through the awfulness we bear fruit and God is glorified. Finally, I would say simply that our response should always be one of love. Our call is to act in a manner consistent with the example of Jesus. And in doing so God is glorified.

In closing I share the words from Paul's prayer for the Philippians because it is my prayer for y'all: "[I pray] that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God." Amen.