

North Shore Congregational Church

Located in Fox Point, WI

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Being Fruit and Bearing Fruit

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Our first reading comes through the prophet Ezekiel speaking of an image familiar to the people of God as creator, gardener and provider even as they themselves felt cut off in exile in Babylon.

Ezekiel 17:22-24

22Thus says the Lord God: I myself will take a sprig from the lofty top of a cedar; I will set it out. I will break off a tender one from the topmost of its young twigs; I myself will plant it on a high and lofty mountain. 23On the mountain height of Israel I will plant it, in order that it may produce boughs and bear fruit, and become a noble cedar. Under it every kind of bird will live; in the shade of its branches will nest winged creatures of every kind. 24All the trees of the field shall know that I am the Lord. I bring low the high tree, I make high the low tree; I dry up the green tree and make the dry tree flourish. I the Lord have spoken; I will accomplish it.

Our second reading is drawn from John's Gospel and just as last week the gospel offered the image of Jesus as the good shepherd this week we receive the image of God and Jesus as vine and vinegrower and the church as branches of this vine. Listen for God's word in the gospel of John Chapter 15 verses 1-9

John 15:1-9

"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. 9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

Let us pray, O Lord, may the words of scripture we have shared and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing to you...and make us grow in you. Amen

Being Fruit and Bearing Fruit

I love this image of the church as branches that are connected to the vine. As I was reflecting on this reading a memory of one of my childhood homes in Escondido California, outside of San Diego came to mind. It was a wonderful place! Our side yard was a grove of fruit trees and the front yard was huge, serving as the neighborhood football field.

When we left for school in the morning to walk to the bus the neighborhood kids and I would occasionally pick a pomegranate off the bushes that seemed like a vine as they grew along the low wooden fence that bordered the yard and the road. As we got to the end of the fence we would wack the pomegranate against the fence post breaking it open and share the seeds on the

bus ride to school. This probably drove our mother's crazy as I am sure we had pomegranate drippings on many of our shirts.

Our home was the neighborhood gathering place, not only because of a yard that doubled as a football field but because our family dinner table was the place to be. Both because of the expansive meals my mom prepared and for the conversations my dad encouraged. My father had a knack for engaging topics that my teenage brothers and their friends would grapple with involving politics, music (such as who was the most talented Beatle) and things of faith.

For me, this bears something of the image of the church, a gathering place to grapple with the things of our life, always remaining connected to the vine, our source.

But I realize my memory of the pomegranate growing on a vine is incorrect, even if it does evoke happy memories of my childhood community that gathered around my home. So then I searched for another image and found one in the PowerPoint Lisa had created for the youth class today. Lisa used a pumpkin vine to make her point.

This reminded me of a meeting I went to of the Wisconsin Congregational Association for the Youth and Camp team that I attended last fall at the Wauwatosa church.

When I pulled in I parked at the edge of the parking lot that bordered someone's home and as I got out of the car I saw that their pumpkin patch had extended into this area. But then I noticed an even stranger thing as I noticed pumpkins growing up into a tall hedge, seeming to hang there almost as oversize decorations.

Now this fertile pumpkin vine that continued to grow up, in and through a tall garden hedge I felt is a wonderful image of the church, able to grow anywhere and in any circumstance, as long as it remains connected to the vine.

And we hear again Jesus saying, "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."

But there is work, responsibility and even accountability involved in the meaning drawn from the reading this morning.

This particular image of God's people, the church, is both comforting and challenging. For a moment let us compare two images here.

The Apostle Paul writes of the church in First Corinthians as the "body" of Christ in which every eye or ear or arm and leg has a particular purpose... celebrating individual gifts.

John's gospel gives us the image of the church as that of vine and branches bearing fruit. Picture a tangle of vine and branches and you realize it is hard to tell one branch from another, where one stops and another starts.

We realize that we are connected and responsible for each other. And the truth is that in order to bear fruit...to be healthy... we understand that all elements of the faith community, ordained or not, long time member or new, adult, youth, or child is held within this tangle of branches connected by faith, inseparable from the vine. None is more important than the other...all enliven the church.

And the standard that is set for the community of faith is simply to love as Jesus loves. Author John O'Day writes, "The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members."

So, what does loving as Jesus loves look like within this image of vine and branches, where it is hard to tell where one branch stops and another starts?

It may be something as simple as coming for the children's Mother's Day pageant simply to show that you love them. It may mean sitting in a different pew with someone you don't yet know well. It may mean showing up to make bag lunches because you don't actually know who gets that done. It may mean coming to prayer in the library at 9 am to see what God may have to say. It may mean offering to take up one of the currently empty board positions simply because there is need. It may look like the intergenerational group we had in the Confirmation class last Sunday, adults talking with youth about how God is part of the everyday things they do.

When I first came to work at this church we had a connection with Community Baptist Church. Sometimes we would go worship at their church on Sherman Boulevard and other times they came here. One Sunday when they were here I was working with the children and this Bible lesson was the reading for the day. To act this out we took a long branch out of the grove and called it the vine. We then took Polaroid pictures (remember those?) and when a picture of each child was developed we taped them to the vine. Then we talked together about how much even though we didn't know each other well, even though we didn't see each other often we are completely connected, because we are connected to the vine who is Jesus.

But the concept of the vine goes way beyond these walls and the branches are found in the streets and hospitals of Nepal, and the streets and hospitals where we live. And we must wonder... Can branches be found in nonviolent protesters seeking a better way, or inside jail walls, or the homeless shelters? Are branches being nourished in faith communities worldwide that struggle with shortages of resources or struggle with questions concerning who and how to love? Where does one branch stop and another start? This itself isn't the question as long as the answer is who and what are we connected to.

And yet we come to the uncomfortable image of some branches bearing fruit while others are pruned. We hear Jesus say of the vinegrower, "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

And before we worry about exclusion or being chastised and "cut" to the quick, let's look at where this lesson is within John's gospel.

This depiction of the vine and branches bearing fruit is part of what is called the "farewell discourse" and Jesus is speaking to his disciples on the night before he would be crucified. He speaks of the completion of his work...his death... and his future and ongoing relationship with believers and the world.

For those first disciples, they are about to experience being cut off from the vine by the death of Jesus on the cross. But Jesus reassures them, even before they can know it is real, that they will survive this and through the resurrection they will flourish and grow, that they will bear fruit.

And the first audience of John's gospel heard this while being "cut off" from the Temple and community because of their belief in Jesus as their Messiah. And the author reassures these people that this will result in abundant life, abundant fruit.

In and through our connection to God and to each other as the church (or branches) we may realize some need for pruning in our lives. We may find some things that do not grow or nourish us. We may realize there are things that strangle and wither, stunting our growth. Only you can ask yourself: Does my daily life make time for God? Does my weekly schedule have room for others that help me flourish, or that somehow helps others to do this? Perhaps the good news for this morning also reminds us that though not every difficulty we encounter nor all the suffering in the world has a purpose to it ...but that when there are things in our life that feel like painful pruning we are not alone, we are not abandoned when we remain...in all things... connected to the vine.

And when the church is at its best it is when those things of God that nurture and sustain us are shared abundantly. Because with God all things are possible and we are not meant to wither and die but to thrive and grow.

We that are here understand the good of belonging, that it is through relying on God and each other we feel connected and made whole. It is this we celebrate when we come to the table to share in Communion. Somehow, in some mysterious way we take Jesus into our lives, we are nourished by the bread and the cup that is meant for us to share together. So let us come together as branches connected to the source of love that makes us whole and helps us grow. Amen!

Invocation and The Lord's Prayer

Gracious God, we know that you are always with us and as we come together worshipping you we ask that you show us where it is we need to grow and bear fruit. Help us to see where we connect and disconnect. Open us to both things that nurture and give us rest as well as things that challenge and stir us beyond our comfort zones. Teach us to remain always with you and teach us to pray as you taught those first disciples so long ago to pray saying, Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name. Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.

Prayer of Thanksgiving

Gracious God, creator and grower,

We are grateful for the many ways you sustain us, encourage us and inspire us. You commanded your disciples to lift up the bread and cup and share in the goodness of what God provides ... and to remember and renew Jesus in our hearts. We are grateful to do this together as a community today. May we continue to connect with one another as branches on your vine and take part in building and restoring Your love in the world.

Where there is anger and violence, let the voice of love be heard.

Where there is brokenness, illness, and grief connect and bind us together, remind us we are never alone.

Let joy and hope abide in our hearts that we may be one. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Let us continue our worship with our offering and gifts.

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