

St Mark Sermon:
May 1-2, 2021
Fifth Sunday after the Easter
“Bearing Fruit; Displaying Discipleship”
Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD

Lectionary Readings

First Reading Acts 8:26-40

“Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.” (Acts 8:35)

Psalm Psalm 22:25-31

“They will proclaim his righteousness, declaring to a people yet unborn: He has done it!” (Ps. 22:25)

New Testament I John 4:7-21

“In this world we are like Jesus. There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.” (I John 4:17a-18)

Gospel John 15: 1-8

“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples” (John: 15-8)

Grace to you, and peace through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Sermon in a Soundbite

Jesus is the true vine who connects us to the Divine gardener. Fruit bearing is the sign that a genuine disciple is connected to the True vine. It is by our spiritual fruit that we exhibit loyalty, faithfulness and love (Jn 15:8). The more we experience God’s love for us; the more fear and anxiety is displaced. Resting in his perfect love produces fruit for all to see and casts out all fear from our hearts.

Pray

I. Introduction: Spring Planting & Pruning

Tis the season for pruning, planting, and preparing plants for a grand harvest. Have you gotten your hands dirty yet? We have a country property outside of IL. In reality, it is nothing more than a rejected cow pasture. We have a house now that sits in one corner. Over the years, I have

planted apple trees with meager results. Last spring, during the season for pruning, planting, and preparing trees, I changed my tactics. I identified several crippled, decrepit, and hidden apple trees in the hedgerows and field margins. These old apple trees, perhaps planted by Johnny himself, are cut off from light, air, and rain. These are feral fruit trees. It took me a week to clear around a single tree. It was selected because blossoms gave a slim sign of hope that it might have an ounce of life left to offer. When the preparing and pruning procedure was complete, there was a 12-foot wide clearing around a snarled and mangled tree. The results were not impressive. The revealed tree looked sad, pathetic, and ready to make its transition into firewood.

As the season rolled on, apples did appear, develop and even ripen. Like the old tree itself, the crop it produced was far from glamorous. These are wild apples, left to natural forces. They are marked with blight, worms, and display numerous imperfections. I don't mind because the effect is just what I anticipated. Deer are not fussy and stop by in the evenings to pick up the droppings of the day. Despite their unsightly appearance, I gathered enough of the fruit from this ancient tree to fill a midsized pail. The apples were peeled, cored, and cleansed of their faults. This is far from an objective statement, but that apple pie was one of the tastiest that I have ever savored. It was as if I could taste my own land. Further, my expectations for a better crop down the road are high. Pruning, preparing, protecting, and nourishing does product fruit.

II. Jesus: The True Vine

Both the epistle and Gospel readings for today come from the writings of John, the disciple whom Jesus loved (Jn. 20:22). The Gospel section is teaching that follows Judas' departure from the last supper. The journey to the cross is ahead. Like any good teacher, Jesus seizes the right moment to review and highlight his most potent message. This lesson about the True vine and fruit production follows the initiation of the Lord's supper. This is a key moment. In addition, Jesus has issued the promise to provide these disciples the gift of the comforter, the Holy Spirit. These disciples will be granted a supernatural resource to continue this ministry.

This Gospel passage gives an account of Jesus preparing his disciples for his departure. "I am the True vine, and my Father is the gardener." Jesus assures them that they are indeed chosen and cleansed. They are cherished by choice and now are vitally connected to the Father. Jesus calls for loyalty and fellowship beyond his death. He wants them to remain as his disciples. They are about to witness his arrest, trial, and death on the cross. The tribulation that is about to unfold is certain to send any group of novice followers into hiding. Why expose yourself to danger when standing out could result in your own death? The disciples could easily fade into the background. They could become lost like the old apple trees I seek to redeem. Like the trees hidden in the advance of the woods taking over the field, the disciples could hide among the wild, restless and rebellious crowd. What does Jesus call for from his disciples? No hiding for you; rather, produce fruit. "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, *showing* yourselves to be my disciples." (Jn. 15:8)

This is the last of Jesus' 7 "I am" statements.

- I am the bread of life.
- I am the light of the world.

- I am the door.
- I am the resurrection and the life.
- I am the good shepherd.
- I am the way, the truth and the life.
- I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

The image of the vine and vineyards is prevalent in Scripture. In fact, last October, I did preach at St. Mark on our responsibility to tend the vineyard under our care. That theme arose from our lectionary readings. In the Scriptures for today, Jesus recasts the image of vines and vineyards from Israel as a nation to his people living for the coming kingdom. Jesus wants his disciples to abide in him and live as the people of God for the nation that is to come. The church is called to step into the place abdicated by the nation of Israel. Jesus connects his people to the Father. This connection provides the Holy Spirit to keep his followers thriving and growing.

Did your mother ever tell you not to be a show-off? I don't want to be the one to tell you that Mom was wrong; but there is an exception. When it comes being part of the true vine; Jesus wants us to advertise our connection in ways that count. We are to 'show off' our spiritual fruit.

III. The Father, the Heavenly Gardener

The Father is the gardener, vinedresser who is ready to prepare and prune us. The imagery is direct. There are two actions the heavenly gardener is ready to take on. Notice that he prunes back every branch that does bear fruit. This is often a counter intuitive agricultural technique. Why cut back a branch that is doing well? As it turns out, cutting it back reduces the greenery of the vine or its length but the vine then sends more of energy into fruit production. In addition, our heavenly Father cuts branches that refuse to generate fruit. These may be dead, dying, or merely unproductive.

What does this mean for the believer? It is important to note that Jesus speaks these words to his devoted disciples. These followers are already clean. In our Acts passage, Philip encounters the Ethiopian eunuch. He shares the meaning of the Scriptures so that this visitor from another land will trust Jesus Christ to be his Savior. Phillip obeys the Lord and displays his fruit. The Ethiopian believes the Scriptures, is made clean in his heart and pleads for external sign of baptism. He is cleansed and joins the Vine.

The disciples are committed followers-they are clean-yet remain in need of further care to develop, mature, and to become productive. Pruning and cutting is not for salvation, but to exhibit our fruit-bearing capacity. Jesus joins us to the Father who pours the Holy Spirit into his disciples. This is all about fruit production for the purpose of placing divine glory on display. This is showing off our unity with God via righteous and Jesus-honoring behavior.

Let's not look back and assess last year's crop. After all, 2020 was the strangest of years. Instead, let's enjoy the Spring and look down the road to a future harvest. Whether you are a new sapling ready to bear fruit or an old tree somewhat hidden, what will increase your access to the sun, air, sky and rain? God is ready to produce fruit in your life. What fruit?

- 1) Love. What hinders the expression and exhibition of love towards others?
- 2) Joy. Are there attitudes or distractions that limit the explosion of joy from your soul?
- 3) Peace. What are the peace disturbances in your life? What is the Lord looking to remove or replace to restore your shalom; the state flourishing?
- 4) Patience. (Forbearance). How can the Holy Spirit sustain your ability to endure challenges or conflicts that rob your readiness to patiently show love?
- 5) Kindness. Does the buzz of technology or the rush of the next appointment inhibit your acts of kindness?
- 6) Goodness. What can be done to take advantage of infinite opportunities to do good? Goodness is not about waiting for an invitation. It is proactively sowing seeds of hope, planting flowers that will bloom, and taking initiative to fill voids with good deeds.
- 7) Faithfulness. Let the goodness of God show up in our words and deeds. Living as disciples in a world that wants to hide traditional Christian morality and virtue.
- 8) Gentleness. What would give you a more affirming touch, appealing speech, soft answers, or soothing responses? How will gentleness expand into your life?
- 9) Self-control. Are there ways that we can feed our habits and starve our vices to exhibit that the presence of the Holy Spirit has more power than our wants, wishes, and ways?

Ask yourself: what the Lord would like to cut back now to see a productive harvest?

IV. Perfect Love casts out all Fear

In his Epistle, John returns to the theme of fruit produced. He mirrors this teaching of Jesus in the exhortation he issues. John's letter to new believers is a remarkable section of Scripture.

Dear friends, since God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us. (Jn 4:11-12).

We show off that we belong to God by how we love one another. In your memory, has there ever been a season in America when people were as divided in perspective, divergent in agendas or as urgent in their demand for action? In our day, the news of events is transmitted in real time with everyday people functioning as the reporters. The chaos of crisis and multiple interpretation stirs up more anger and strife. There can be no peace for the turmoil across the land becomes our immediate focus. This is hard to watch and even more difficult to absorb. My point is not to moan or grumble about the non-believing world. Such were the conditions when Jesus spoke these Gospel words to his disciples. It is within such conditions that our Lord calls us to display with vividness how he loves us by showing how we love others. This message may be old and tattered; but its as relevant as when it was first spoken on the night in which Jesus was betrayed.

The common thread between our Gospel and the Epistle is the notion of abiding, resting, and absorbing God's love. Residing in God's presence does something to us. As we enjoy the comfort and renewal of basking in the love of God, fear is pushed aside. The turmoil that divides and separates us from ourselves and from others is removed. God's love is a perfecting force for nurture and good.

Picture that old disfigured apple tree, hidden away in the midst of all of the vigorous growth. A fruit tree is not an oak, ash, or maple. It does not prosper when it has to compete for light or sky space. It needs conditions where it can have access to air, moisture, and sunshine. For believers, we are like apple trees that require the love of God to surround and nurture us.

V. Application: Spring Pruning, planting & preparing.

What fear and apprehension needs to be removed in your life? What space needs to be cleared or prepared to open the way for the display of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? Those who are joined to the True Vine are open to the recreative work of the Father.

Let me remind you of a classic children's story. "Heidi" by Johanna Spyri (1881). The story is 140 years old. Even if you don't know the original, the themes of its story line have been retold time and time again with similar plotlines. [Shirley Temple did the classic screen version (1937) and there is a Swiss version (Anuk Steffen; 2015) available on Hoopla at your local library.]

Heidi is an orphan. She is forced to live with her strict, stifling and selfish Aunt Dete. When Aunt Dete has the opportunity to secure a new position, Heidi becomes too much of an inconvenience. Aunt Dete takes Heidi into the mountains to live with her gruff and grumpy grandfather, a goatherder who living deep in the Alps. After a broken relationship with his Son and the nearby village, he is a bitter man who has rejected religion. Heidi and her grandfather make a truly odd couple. He gives her a cold welcome. Yet, life on the mountain suits Heidi. She falls in love with the fields, flowers and goats. She finds edelweiss, plays in the hay, and finds the freedom exhilarating. Her spirit soars and the joy in her heart is infectious. Her goodness, softness, love, and kindness soften the old man's heart. The rustic cabin has no furniture for a second person. There is but one wooden chair at the table. In silence, as the old man begins to see Heidi for who she is, he builds a new chair and places it at the table to welcome her.

She has other adventures are well but that's another story. Heidi's open heart touches the souls of all those who surround her: her grandfather, Peter, his blind grandmother, and eventually, Clara, a girl bound to a wheelchair.

What makes the storyline of Heidi so enticing and timeless? It does not take great words or wisdom to open a heart. It takes the simplicity of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness and self-control. Heidi's heart is filled with the fruit of God's spirit and it melts the hearts of others. Our world needs more hearts like Heidi's. How about yours?

My apple tree in the hedgerow still looks rugged and worn. It leans terribly. I wonder, might this may be its year for new growth? Do you see yourself as prepared for a new growing season? Are you ready to show off your fruit to identify yourself as a loyal, committed, and loving disciple?

Prayer: Jesus, you are the True Vine. Thank you for connecting us to the Divine gardener and for the power of the Holy Spirit. Please prepare us, prune us, free us to be more apt vessels to display your love to a lost and fractured world.