

Works, Light, Fruit

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan
June 25 & 26, 2018*

Scripture: *John 15:1-8*

I am the vine; you are the branches.

John 15:5

Sermon

It's about Jesus. Don't forget that. Don't ever forget that. It's about Jesus. Whether we're talking about doing good works, whether we're talking about letting our light shine, whether we're talking about bearing fruit—it's all about Jesus!

Our theme this week is about all those things: about doing good works, about letting our light shine, about bearing fruit. And it's easy for us to get distracted and to think this is about us. It's easy to think this is about how faithful we are, how earnest we are, how committed we are. But it's not about us. It's about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

WE JUST LISTENED TO THE SCRIPTURE about the vine and the branches. We heard that some branches bear fruit and that some branches don't. We heard that some branches get pruned and that some branches get cut off. We also heard a command from Jesus, a command to "remain in me." And we heard a warning from Jesus, a warning that "you [can't] bear fruit unless you remain in me."

So we noticed all the stuff about the branches. And that's no wonder. Because we are the branches. But that Scripture is not about the branches. It's about the vine. Because the vine is Jesus. And it's all about Jesus.¹

DO YOU KNOW WHAT THAT MEANS? It means we don't get to take credit for the fruit we bear. No; it's Jesus who is bearing the fruit. Because Jesus is the vine. So we don't get

¹ "I am the vine" is a loaded expression. Along with the other "I am" sayings in John's Gospel (I am the bread of life; I am the light of the world; I am the gate for the sheep; I am the good shepherd; I am the resurrection and the life; I am the way, the truth, and the life; before Abraham was, I am), it points to Jesus as God, the God of Israel, the God who said, "I am who I am."

At the same time, "I am the vine" exploits an Old Testament image to point to Jesus as the one who takes on Israel's identity and fulfills Israel's purpose. In Isaiah 5, Israel is the Lord's vineyard and the people of Judah are vines. In Jeremiah 2, Israel itself is a vine. And in Psalm 80, Israel is the vine that the Lord transplanted from Egypt to the Holy Land.

So, whether we're talking about God or about Israel, it's all about Jesus!

to say to God, we don't get to say to our bunkie, "Hey, did you notice what I did there? Did you see how self-controlled I was? Did you see how I held back my anger? Pretty good, eh?" We don't get to say that. We don't get to take credit for the fruit we bear. Because Jesus is the vine. And the fruit we bear is the work of the life-giving Spirit.

The fruit we bear—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control—the fruit we bear is the work of the Spirit who flows from Jesus to us, who flows the same way that life-giving sap flows from the vine to the branches. So we don't get to take any credit. Because it's Jesus, through the Spirit, who is bearing the fruit.

BACK IN THE 1970s, Ken Medema wrote a song he called, "The Tree Song." It went like this:

*I saw a tree by the riverside, one day as I walked along,
straight as an arrow pointing to the sky, growing tall and strong.
"How do you grow so tall and strong?" I said to the riverside tree.
This is the song that my tree friend sang to me.
I've got roots growing down to the water.
I've got leaves reaching up to the sunshine.
And the fruit that I bear is a sign of the life in me.
I am shade from the hot summer sundown.
I am nest for the birds of the heavens.
I'm becoming what the Lord of trees has blessed me to be:
a strong, young tree!²*

We're becoming what the Lord has blessed us to be. So we don't get to take credit for the fruit we bear. And that's okay. We don't need credit. The fruit we bear is a sign of the life that's in us, a sign of the life of Christ in us. And if we have Christ, we have all we need. It's about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

NOW, SOMETIMES WE DO MEASURE OUR FAITH by the fruit we bear. Sometime we measure our faith by the light that shines from us. Sometimes we measure our faith by our good works. And there is something to be said for that.

² Here's a stanza added on June 25, 2018:

*I saw a tree in a prison yard, where walls and bars abound,
where hope is slim and joy is thin, until the lost are found.
"How do you grow in captivity?" I said to the MTU/IBC tree.
This is the song that my tree friend sang to me.*

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says a light that doesn't shine is like salt that isn't salty. It's good for nothing. A light that doesn't shine, it's not a light at all. Also in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus says you can recognize a tree by its fruit. And a good tree will produce good fruit.

SO WE TAKE A LOOK AT OURSELVES. And we take a look at our fellow Christians. And we see how we measure up. We notice that some of us are all flowers, some of us are all fruit, and some of us are just nuts. We notice that some of us are searchlights and some of us are just nightlights.

But before we get depressed or judgmental, let's remember that there is a time and a place for everything. If someone is trying to find her way across a dark room, a night-light is just what she needs. A searchlight would blind her, and she would stumble and fall.

In the same way, there is a season for bare branches, a season for leaves, a season for grapes, and a season for wine. And what matters for every season is the vine. And the vine is Jesus. He is our life. He is the source of our fruitfulness.

AND THIS IS NOT SOMETHING to be anxious about. Yes, Jesus says his Father cuts off fruitless branches. And that sounds scary. But he also says his Father prunes fruitful branches. Then he tells his disciples that they have been pruned by his word. But if they've been pruned, that means they're fruitful, which is good news! Because Jesus is the source of our fruitfulness.

And this is not something to be anxious about. Yes, Jesus says, "Remain in me." Yes, Jesus says, "Apart from me you can do nothing." And that sounds scary. What if we fail? What if fall? But Jesus also says, "I remain in you." And those words are filled with grace. Of course they are. It's about Jesus. It's all about Jesus. And Jesus is faithful.

A LITTLE MORE ABOUT THIS. In Matthew 12, Jesus says a good tree bears good fruit. But that's not exactly what he says. He says, "Make a tree good, and its fruit will be good." And, look, Jesus makes you good! Jesus is making you alive. The Holy Spirit is giving birth to a new you, a transformed you. The process is underway. The Apostle Paul says, "If anyone is in Christ, new creation!" That's you! That's me! The change is underway!

Look. Look carefully, and you will see the signs, the signs of life. But don't look to see how you measure up. It's not about you. It's about Christ in you. Because it's about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

WEEKS AGO, JAN PLANTED seeds for a collection of herbs: cilantro, parsley, basil, thyme. And we've been watching. The cilantro is up and so is the basil. We know they're going to really take off soon. The parsley? It's on the slow side, but it's established.

Then there are some tiny little seedlings that have just poked up through the soil. They don't amount to anything. But they are not seeds anymore. They're alive. By some miracle, by some everyday miracle, they are alive. They're alive, even though they're still almost invisible. They're alive, even though you would never notice them if you didn't take a really close look.

YOU AND I ARE NOT SO DIFFERENT. Some trees have branches that look dead. Not a sign of life anywhere. The kind of branches you cut off to make room for others. But sometimes, if you wait—or if you're lazy—sometimes those branches can surprise you. Look really close, and you'll see it. First, one tiny bud. Then another. It's the smallest bit of green. But it's all the difference between dead and alive. And it's so good to be alive!

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. He makes us alive. He keeps us alive. Jesus sends the life-giving Spirit to us. And when the time is right, we bud, we flower, we leaf out, we bear fruit. And this is to the Father's glory. It shows that we are Jesus's disciples. And, of course, it is about Jesus. It's all about Jesus.

✠

Glory and thanks be to God:
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

✠