

Sermon
3 May 2015
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Text: John 15:1-8

There was a missionary in Africa who lived in a very small rural village, where they had no electricity. Luckily there was a small generator that, when needed, supplied electricity to the church and wee manse next door to the church.

One day some natives from a neighbouring village came to visit the minister.

They noticed the electric light hanging from the ceiling of his living room. They watched wide-eyed as he turned the little switch and the light went on.

Then one of the visitors asked if he could please have one of the bulbs.

The minister, thinking that he wanted it for a trinket or something, happily gave him one of the extra bulbs.

On his next visit to the neighbouring village, the minister stopped at the hut of the man who had asked for the bulb.

Imagine his surprise when he saw the bulb hanging from an ordinary piece of string! So naturally it didn't work.

Patently the minister explained to him that he needed to have electricity and a wire to bring the electric current to the bulb, before it would be able to give him light...

Now, we may share an understanding smile at the innocence of that African man, but you know what? We may not be much different...

In our reading today, we heard Jesus tell a story concerning the importance of our connection to the true source of life...To *our* continued source of power.

Jesus uses the analogy of the vineyard, of the vine and the branches. Just as the electricity provides the power necessary for a bulb to produce light, so the vine provides the flow of life necessary for the branches to produce fruit.

As branches we are spiritually alive; yet we can only grow if we are connected to Jesus, if we are connected to the true vine.

As long as we are connected to Jesus the power of the Holy Spirit can run through us and keep us spiritually alive, producing fruit.

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Let's take a look at the background of our Reading.

The Gospel according to John was written quite a bit later than the other 3 Gospels, and it was written in a completely different style. Where Matthew, Mark and Luke give a historic account of the life of Jesus, John focuses more on interpreting what Jesus said and did and what it means for his readers.

The passage we read this morning is one of the famous “I am”-passages in this Gospel, describing how Jesus saw himself and what that means for those who believe in him. Jesus also says:

- “I am the bread of life”
- “I am the light for the world”
- “I am the door”
- “I am the good shepherd”
- “I am the resurrection and the life”
- “I am the way, the truth and the life.”

And here Jesus says “I am the true vine, and my Father is the Gardener.” This passage is very straight forward and easy to understand, and at the same time very powerful.

Especially this time of year, when everybody are out in their gardens, working hard to make it look lovely, neat and colourful, feeling proud every time you look at your handiwork! Feeling happy when the flowers you planted bloom, when the rose bushes you pruned bear lots of beautiful flowers...

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Growing grapes formed a very important part of life in Jesus' time, so every single person who heard this message would understand very well what Jesus meant.

Jesus refers to God as the Gardener, to himself as the vine and to us believers as the branches.

Just like any true Gardener, God takes good care of his garden. If he sees dried out branches that bear no fruit, he cuts them off.

Although small pieces of wood that were cut from plants were used for lots of different things in Biblical times, because people never wasted anything in those days, cuttings of the vineyard were good for nothing except burning.

So branches that didn't bear any fruit were eventually thrown into the fire, because they were good for nothing else.

But any branches that carry fruit are pruned by the Gardener, so that it will be able to carry even more fruit.

Any good gardener knows that plants need to be pruned. If you don't know much about gardening, pruning could seem like a counterproductive action, because why would you want to cut branches that bear fruit already? The truth is, fruit bearing branches can carry even more fruit and be even healthier when pruned in the correct way.

If we apply this metaphor to our lives it means the following: The reason you plant a vineyard in the first place, it so that it can produce grapes.

So any owner of a vineyard will do anything in his power for his vineyard to produce as many healthy grapes as possible.

Our purpose here on earth is to bear fruit to the glory of God. God put us on this earth because he wants to use us to make a difference wherever we go. He wants us to tell other people about him, to share the love he has for us with others, to show people what it means to believe in God and to make the world a better place.

And since it is God who put us on earth, like a gardener who plants a vineyard, he takes care of us. The thing is, you can only bear fruit if you are rooted in the vine. No branch can bear fruit all by itself – we *need* Jesus if we want to grow, and we need God to take care of us.

And although all of us understand – theoretically speaking – that pruning *is* necessary; we don't like being pruned, because it's painful and hard.

Nobody likes being told or shown that your life is *not* going in the right direction, that what you are doing is wrong, that you have to change your attitude or your views, or that you need to work harder at certain things, that you can give more – but if any of these things is true of you, God *is* going to tell you that. He is not just going to ignore that fact that you are not living to your full potential as a Christian, because then he would be like a gardener who doesn't prune his vines.

And although we don't like being pruned, I think the whole process will be easier to accept if we focus on what the end product will be, if we understand the reason why it's happening to us. And then, of course, we

always have the consolation that in order to be able to prune a plant, the gardener needs to be very close to it...

So what do we need to do to bear fruit? I think that sometimes we totally overthink this. To bear fruit is not as hard as it may sound. The only thing a branch needs to do in order to be able to bear fruit, is to be rooted in the vine. That's it!

We need to be rooted in Jesus. And if we are, we *will* bear fruit! It will come naturally.

If you live in close relation with God you will know what he expects of you and you will want to live a life to his honour and glory. You will want to put others first and live a life of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (like we find the fruits of the Spirit described in Galatians 5.)

And how can we make sure that we stay rooted in Christ?

- By coming to church regularly, where we can experience communion of believers and listen to the word of God, which will be like rain watering us;
- By reading the Bible, where we can find nourishment for our souls;
- By praying often, looking up to God like a plant looks up to the sun.

Just as no plant can survive without sunlight, good soil and water, we can't survive without God. But unlike the unpredictable weather we have in this country, we can know for certain that God is *always* there.

He planted us where he wants to use us, and there he'll take good care of us. He planted us in good soil, and he'll make sure we get just the right amount of rain and enough sunshine.

So let's bask ourselves in the rays of God's love, and grow. Grow as people, grow as Christians. And if we go through troubled times or have difficult things to handle, let's never forget that God is always close and that he knows what he is doing. He isn't just any gardener, he's a professional.

And let's bear fruit, in abundance, so we can fulfil our purpose here on earth. In Biblical times a bunch of grapes could be a meal; it could be turned into a refreshing drink; it could be dried and used to eat later or be an ingredient in a different dish; it could even be used as decoration. So let's be everything we can be – let's feed the hungry, care for the sick, carry the sad and the weak and reach out to the lonely.

Because nobody who understands how magical it can be to be rooted in Christ, will choose to be useless and eventually get thrown away into the fire.

Let's not be like bulbs hanging on pieces of string – let's make sure we are connected to Christ so we can make our lights shine brightly in this (sometimes) very dark world we live in.

Amen