

We are back into our Winter sermon series this morning called ‘Rooted and Growing,’ looking at some of the ways that Scripture uses the analogy of a tree, or branch, or vine, or various tree-like images to speak about our spiritual formation in Christ.

Because every time that the Bible speaks about us bearing fruit, the metaphor is that we are like that thing which bears fruit. We are like a tree or a branch—we see this in Psalm 1—that bears a certain kind of fruit depending on our connectivity or right-relatedness with God.

Interestingly, Scripture then also uses that same analogy with Christ—who is metaphorically also described as a tree, a vine, and a branch which gives to capacity to bear fruit to all that is connected to Him.

And so our capacity to bear fruit—godly fruit, righteous fruit, fruit that makes a difference—is directly connected to our rootedness in Christ.

Jesus says in Matthew 7:17 – “...*every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit.*” And then in Luke 6:44 – “*Each tree is recognized by its own fruit.*”

Seems simple enough, right? Bear good fruit. Do good things. Be a good person.

But then look at what Jesus says in John 15:16 – “*You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—**fruit that will last...***” And then later in the New Testament, we read often about the fruit of God as being connected with and inspired by the Holy Spirit.

In other words, this isn’t just about being a good person and doing good things. This is about stretching ourselves beyond common courtesy and niceties and producing fruit that points to the glory of God. That actually provides hope for our fragile human condition. That isn’t just fruit for today but fruit for eternity.

So it’s kind of an important topic. And to dig deeper into this whole idea, we’re going to look at **John 15:1-9.**

“*I am the true vine,*” says Jesus, “*and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*”

Now, before we get too practical here, I want to just pull back and analyze this analogy for a moment. Because there’s Biblical-historical significance to the use of this image.

In Psalm 80:8, the psalmist speaks of the Lord transplanting a ‘vine’ from Egypt—in other words, Israel, whom He took out of Egypt—and clearing a ground for it so that it can root and fill the land.

In the Old Testament, *Israel* was the vine that God—the Gardener, the Vinedresser—had planted. They were meant to be like a vine that was planted to bear good fruit and produce good ‘wine’—ie. wisdom, justice, righteousness—so that the nations would see the glory of God. It was metaphorical language used to speak of God’s mission through Israel.

We need to understand that imagery—that that’s what it was for. Because then later in Ezekiel 15, the Lord God comes to the prophet Ezekiel and explains that Jerusalem has become essentially a useless vine, a vine that has not fulfilled its intended purpose and has not born any fruit because of its unfaithfulness. It didn’t remain grafted or connected to the Gardener.

So for Jesus to now resurrect this image of the vine in John 15 and use it for *himself* is something to pay attention to. Because He’s implying that what was once Israel’s role—to reveal God’s glory through the way that they ordered themselves and pursued justice and thus draw the nations to this God—that is now being taken on and fulfilled by Jesus, *as well as* all who are grafted into Him.

In other words, the new people of Israel. The new people of God, from every nation—not just one.

Verse 5. He is the vine, and out of His ‘body’ come the branches. And we’re going to talk a bit more about our dynamic together as branches next week. But for now just picture that, that we are branches that shoot off of the vine that is Jesus.

Think about that image. Provided that the branches are connected to the vine, passing nutrients, getting water through the vine, getting its life from the vine, the branches then will grow and bear fruit—the kind of fruit that isn’t mimicked or manufactured but that comes out of a place of connectedness.

Fruit that is reflective of the health of the vine—which is apparently what a good vinedresser focuses on.

There’s a book called “The Art of Vinemaking” by Bette Dickenson, based on conversations that the author had with a vineyard keeper named Dave. And in their conversations, Dave shared with her that a vinedresser doesn’t actually pay a lot of attention to the fruit. That’s not the focus.

He said this: “It’s not that they don’t care about the fruit. It’s just that, by that point, their work is already done. All that matters to good vinedressers is the health, quality, and vitality of their vines. If they pay attention to those things, good fruit will be the natural byproduct.”

In other words, the vinedresser’s primary concern isn’t the fruit but that the vines and the branches are flourishing. Because good fruit, then, will be the natural byproduct of that flourishing.

Jesus is using a very simple horticultural analogy to explain some pretty complex spiritual realities.

Now, if—for whatever reason—the branch is not getting its nutrients, its water, its life from the vine, it's not going to bear fruit. And at some point the gardener might just have to cut it off.

But, it might also be the case that the branch just needs to be pruned. Verse 2: "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

What does this pruning look like? Well, it can take on a variety of different forms—probably as various as there are people to prune.

But what this does, though, is that it points to the reality that even when we are doing many things for the Kingdom and feeling like we're doing all the right things—that challenges still come.

I'm putting my time in, I'm giving, I'm serving, I'm walking with you, I'm praying, I'm feeling connected—and yet life hurts right now. What gives?

Well, it might just be that the Gardener, who loves the fruit that you've produced for His Name and glory, wants you to bear even more fruit. To be even healthier. To flourish even more than you already are.

Because remember, He's not just after fruit for *this* life but fruit for eternity. And fruit for eternity—the kind of fruit that points to His glory and demands spiritual maturity—takes pruning. It requires cutting some things off. Simplifying. Sanding down the edges. It takes, maybe yes, some suffering. Pruning hurts.

But in it all, we can know that He has our holistic flourishing in mind. Because His desire, always, is that we continue to grow—not just in bearing fruit—but in *how* we bear fruit. So that it becomes healthier, simpler, focused, instinctive.

When the only litmus test of our spiritual health isn't what we do, how much we serve, how much we give, how kind and gracious we are, but rather by how connected we are to Him.

What does it look like to do that for yourself? It's a different focus.

Let me give you an example:

Last summer, Regent College hosted Yohanna Katanacho—he's a Palestinian-Arab Christian who also has Israeli citizenship. He grew up in Jerusalem and moved to Nazareth later in life. He was formerly an atheist, but he had an encounter with Jesus and has spent much of his subsequent life pursuing peacemaking efforts in his very war-torn country.

At one point in the journey, God put on his heart to start a bible study at the same university at which he had been teaching atheism. And while he was continuing the study the Bible, he came across the passage in Matthew 5 where it's written, "love your enemies."

At first it really caught him off guard. Yohanna didn't need a dictionary to define what an enemy was. He was regularly stopped by Israeli soldiers. He was once arrested for going to a chemistry class. And now he was being asked to love his enemies.

Why would God was asking him to betray his own people by loving 'the other side'?

But as he was struggling with this, one day he went to a Christian coffee shop where there were fliers written in Hebrew and English, titled "Real love." So he took one of those fliers back to his home to pray over it, and as he knelt to pray, he confessed before God that he could not bring himself to love his enemies. He felt he call, but he just could not do it.

"But," he said, "can we make a compromise? I'll put these fliers in my ID card, and when a soldier stops me, I will give them my ID card. They'll open it, and they'll see the flier inside, and they'll ask about it. And then I will tell them that this is how my God wants me to relate to you. With love."

So he did that, day after day. Soldiers would stop him 2-3 times a day, and he would have that conversation continually. Over time, he said, his feelings started to change, but he wasn't paying much attention to it.

Until one day, Yohanna was doing photocopying for his church. It was a time when lots of people were creating and distributing political statements through fliers. And Israeli laws at the time said that if you were caught with political fliers, the soldiers were allowed to shoot you at the feet if you didn't stop distributing or tried to run away.

Now, most Israeli soldiers apparently don't know Arabic (what Palestinians speak), so they wouldn't be able to instinctively distinguish between church fliers and political ones.

In other words, if you have fliers, you should hide them. So Yohanna left the church having put the fliers into his inner jacket pocket.

And as he was coming by the Damascus gate (one of the gates of Jerusalem), he saw three soldiers at a distance and knew that this was going to be problematic. His chest started pounding, and as he was going down the stairs, and they called him over.

So in a bit of a panic, he unzipped the inner pocket of his jacket very quickly, but they thought that he was going to attack them. So they whipped out their machine guns and pointed them at his head, yelling at him.

And without even thinking, he placed his hand on his heart and shouted out, “I love you.”

They all stood there in complete shock. Yohanna himself was in shock. And for a few moments nobody knew what to do. But then the soldiers lowered their guns and said to him, “We wish that all Palestinians were like you.”

Yohanna then of course was able to have a conversation with them. And he explained that love isn’t just a feeling. It’s a decision that we make in order to honor Jesus Christ. And our love muscles grow stronger when we exercise them in the context of hatred. And we learn to pursue justice and peace not with revenge but with love.

In other words, Yohanna knew that truly bearing the fruit of peace and love required that his fruit come from a place of being grounded in the God of love who was using Yohanna’s own war-torn context to prune him and help him to practice bearing truly righteous fruit. Not just ‘good’ fruit but fruit that makes a difference. Eternal fruit.

It’s why Jesus says over and over that we *cannot* bear fruit apart from Him. Verse 4: “*Remain in me,*” he says.

Remain in me. Other translations have written, “Abide in me.” But it can also mean stay, remain, live, dwell. It’s a weighty word that shows up eleven times in this section of John’s gospel.

Abide in me. Dwell in me. Remain in me. It’s Jesus’ constant invitation to us. He said it routinely to His disciples, and He says it to us as well.

Abide in me. I am the Vine. Dwell in me. Make your home in me. Rest in me. Settle here with me. Park here with me.

In other words, don’t go anywhere else. Don’t connect yourself to something else because my Father, the Gardener, will care for you and help you flourish. *You cannot do this by yourself.*

Now, remember, this passage was of course first spoken to Jesus’ twelve disciples—all of whom, I’m guessing, we’re ready and eager to fight tooth-and-nail with Jesus, whatever he wanted them to do and *then* some. They were ready to pull out swords, march with picket signs, take down Caesar’s court, build an army—whatever it would take to get Jesus on the throne.

But they weren’t actually rooting themselves in Him, but rather in their own ideas of Him. And sometimes I wonder if that’s actually what got the better of Judas. Jesus just didn’t turn out to be who Judas wanted Him to be.

Because what Jesus wanted from his disciples wasn't a 20-step plan on how they were going to conquer the world for Him. What Jesus wanted from his disciples wasn't a list of accomplishments, a 10-year plan for seeing 'x' amount of good deeds every year. What Jesus wanted from his disciples wasn't assurance that their fruit would be good enough.

What Jesus wanted was for His disciples to *remain in Him*. That's what He cared about most. Verse 4: "*Remain in me, as I also remain in you.*"

Remember, the Gardener's focus isn't on the fruit but on the health of the vine and its branches. All that *this* Vine is asking is that we remain in Him like how He is remaining in us. That we abide in Him with the same effort as how He is remaining in us.

Because verse 4: "*No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.*"

Now, to stay or remain in any one particular place is hard for us these days. The idea of remaining in anything is becoming more and more a novelty. When a couple has been married for 50+ years. When someone has stayed in one place their whole lives.

People are surprised by this. Because our personal lives are always changing. Our world is constantly changing. And we find more and more coping mechanisms for dealing with it that usually involve *more* change.

God knows this. From His frame of reference, it is nothing new that the world changes. He's seen it happen many times over.

A changing climate is nothing new in God's eyes. A changing political climate is nothing new in God's eyes. World powers trying to gain more power is nothing new. Human violence is nothing new. Humans as both the keepers and killers of the earth is nothing new.

And neither is His call to remain in Him. This is not new either. Because although our personal lives are constantly changing and our world is constantly changing, He does not change.

He is the only constant. *He* is the only one in whom we can remain in at all times and truly rest in the midst of changing circumstances.

Yes, as followers of a justice-centered God, we must always be mindful of the need to respond—to suffering, to injustice, to an opportunity for prayer and peace and witness—and there may be ten steps needed in order to respond to something appropriately.

But to remain, to abide, must always be step one. (Lane's story.)

For those of us who are connected to the Vine that is Jesus Christ, we must return over and over to passages like this and discover again and again that our task in the face of an anxious and broken world is to remain in Him.

Only from there can we truly grow and exercise our spiritual muscles in a way that brings *Him* glory rather than focusing on our own ability to succeed or achieve.

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” (v. 5). That’s not just a pleasant idea. It is the solution to our human condition.

He is the Vine. And we, as His branches, are not just a community of people trying to follow a bunch of rules so that we look nice. We are a community that comes together because we are hungry and thirsting for an answer to our human experience that transcends time and place and circumstance.

We are searching for somewhere to rest. For *someone* in whom we can root ourselves. The source of our life. The beginning and the end. The One in whom all things hold together.

Jesus. And as a vine sustains a branch, so is He sustaining you.

Abide in Him.