

ACTS 8:26-40 (p. 890)

APRIL 29, 2018

JOHN 15:1-8 (p. 876)

BLAINE

PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION

Lighten our load Lord, by enlightening our hearts. Turn our worries and fears into heaven-filled joy as we center our lives on you. Cause us to hear your voice—your Spirit’s guiding whisper—calling out to us by name. And then, empower us to faithfully follow, bearing much fruit along the way. We ask this in Jesus’ Name. Amen.

“PRUNING SEASON”

A Pastor, at a Conference, shared a story with a kernel of wisdom. He talked about a time when he was asked to officiate at a formal, military, Memorial service. It was for a General, a beloved veteran, and several thousand people were expected to attend. The service was to be held at one of those elegant, downtown Washington Cathedrals. And the deceased General had left specific instructions for what he wanted. In addition to Full-Military Honors, at the close of the service, the General wanted the Officiating Pastor to lead an Honor Guard, complete with flags and rifles and a score of High-Ranking Military members. They were to come down the center aisle in a solemn procession, stop at the casket for a moment of silent remembrance, and then proceed through a side door into a glass-enclosed atrium. There, everyone was to kneel together in prayer, as the entire congregation looked on. The effect would have been dramatic! Except for one thing. The Pastor indeed led the entire procession down the aisle, up to the casket, then out through the door. But it was the door into the broom closet, from which they then had to make a hasty retreat!

Now I can see myself doing something like that! And the Speaker, in telling us this, was noticeably embarrassed! His point though, if I remember correctly, was that in ministry, there are going to be times when you'll run into unexpected, unplanned situations! And that's true, of course. But the take home, at least for me was; "If you are going to follow someone, you'd better make sure they know where they are going"!

Last week, Jesus said, "I am the Good Shepherd. My sheep know my voice and they follow me." And I'm going to assume, that as a believer, you trust that Jesus knows where He is going! But now this week, He says, "I am the true vine and you are the branches. If you remain in me, I will remain in you." Following is one thing, right? You can do that from a safe distance, from afar even! But to abide, to stay close, to remain near, you have to be there in the first place, don't you!

Context is critical! You know how often I say that! So, given the context of this lesson, how important do you think it is? Just prior our text, Jesus and the Disciples were in the Upper Room. They have shared the Passover together, and are now heading to the Garden of Gethsemane for prayer. In a few hours, Jesus will be betrayed by His friend Judas, and arrested by an angry mob. He has told His Disciples that He is leaving soon, and that they can't follow just yet. He has explained, clearly, what all of that will look like! They are now walking through the darkened streets of the city, contemplating all this. Jesus knows what awaits Him! Time is short! So, given that, how important do you think what He says here, might be? "I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you remain in me, if you abide in me, and I in you, then you will bear much fruit."

Jesus says, “I AM”! “I am the vine”! He says what His Father said to Moses in Egypt, when He was about to free them from captivity. Moses questions the Lord; “What if they ask me your Name? What should I tell them? Who should I say you are?” And God answers, “tell them I AM”! In Greek, the phrase is “ego eimi”! And it carries a timeless tense! In the Greek language, chronology is critical. So, most Greek words are limited to either past, present, or future tense! But this “I AM” phrase has a timeless tense, eternal significance!

This is Jesus’ last “I AM” statement, by-the-way. This is the final, earthly declaration He shares! Prior to this, Jesus has stated, “I am the light of the world” (John 8:12), and “I am the bread of life” (John 6:35), “I am the Way” (John 14:6), and “I am the Door” (John 10:9). Last week Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd, I know my sheep and my sheep know me” (John 10:14). Scholars tell us that these great, “I am” statements by Jesus, are strong affirmations of His association with the Father! They actually declare His Deity! And now, on the night before His Crucifixion, Jesus tells us, “I am the Vine”. How important do you think that conversation might be?

“I am the Vine, and you are the branches.” There is interconnectedness implied, isn’t there, a bond, a relationship! It was springtime in Jerusalem, and maybe they were walking past a vineyard. Or maybe Jesus stopped to pick up a trimmed-off branch. Maybe they have just passed by the Great Temple, which had an image of grape vines carved on the door, or went out of the city through the Golden Gate, on their way to the Kidron Valley, which had a similar picture engraved on its door?

They would have known though! The image that Jesus was painting would have been quite clear to the Disciples, in fact to anyone living in Israel at the time! Many were farmers or shepherds themselves! Almost everyone lived within sight of a vineyard or two. It would be like us, here, with Cherry trees! Which by-the-way, are currently being pruned!

In addition, the Disciples are all faithful Jews. They would have instantly recognized the biblical theme. The Prophet Isaiah often described the “House of Israel” and the “Men of Judah” as the “Vineyard of the Lord”. And the Prophet Jeremiah called God’s People a “choice vine, a vine of sound and reliable stock, one planted by the hand of God Himself!” The Hymn Book of the Temple, even, the Psalms, was chocked clear full of vineyard images! They would have known!

They have also heard Jesus use horticultural examples in His Parables before: “workers in the Lord’s vineyard”, “the sowing of seed in various types of soil”, even one about “an unproductive fig tree, that withers away at Jesus’ command”! The vineyard metaphor would have been easy to understand! Again, like for us here in Cherry Country! It would not have been difficult to relate too! But I wonder if they grasped the magnitude?

“I am the true vine, and you are the branches”. I am the source of your strength and nourishment, as well as the way in which you stay grounded! I am that which connects you to one another too, and the absolute only way in which you can ever bear fruit! And therefore, in order to be productive in any way, to live even, you need to “remain in me”!

Some other translations say, “abide in me”. So, I looked up the Greek. It’s “meno”. It carries a sense of “staying put”, of “remaining where you are found”, of “dwelling” or “lodging”, of “having a permanent home”! Remain in Me! Abide in Me! “Stay with me, live with Me, dwell with Me, exist in Me”! The Disciples would have heard, “I have come to you, and made my home among you”! They would have instantly visualized the Incarnation, the Word becoming Flesh and dwelling among them! They would have immediately grasped the critical significance of what Jesus was saying here! And given the fact that He has just told them that He is returning to the Father, the command to “make your home with Me, and I will make my home with you” probably got their attention! But does it get ours?

Home is a pretty important place, don’t you think! Walk through a Hallmark store, or look at someone’s office desk, or better yet, glance at almost any refrigerator door, in almost any home, and you’ll quickly see just how important family connections are! You’ll see pictures and drawings, and awards and such—from precious loved ones! You’ll find sayings like, “Home is Where the Heart is,” or “Home is where they always have to take you in,” or “There is no Place like Home”! You’ll discover an atmosphere of belonging, won’t you, a place of welcome! “Remain! Abide! Stay put with Me, and I will stay put with you!”

Plato wrote that “the human animal, from the very first, seems to have an insatiable longing, a great desire for connection. The infant demands attention from the world and insists on being noticed and served.”

“The human cannot survive without making connections,” he continues, “first with the mother, and then with one human being after another.” Sigmund Freud said, “A longing for connection is the very beginning of all human thought and culture, the explanation for all human achievement!” Apparently, as human beings, we have a thing for each other! And apparently God, the maker of Heaven and Earth, has a thing for us! He even tells us to “remain in Him”!

That’s a comforting thought, don’t you think, staying connected with Almighty God, walking hand-in-hand with the Lord! And when you think about it, it’s a lot of what we, as the Church, are called to do. This is the place where we abide with one another, and where we learn to abide in Christ. This is where we study the Scriptures and learn about our relationship with the Lord. This is where we worship together, and pray together, and develop the habits and practices that help us stay connected to each other, and especially to the Resurrected Lord!

This is home, folks, a place of rest and peace, of safety and security, of nurture and life! This, here, is the Vineyard image we see in today’s text! We are the plants, growing side-by-side! “I am the vine”, says Jesus, “and you are the branches. And when we stay connected, we will bear all kinds of fruit!”

There is a Converse though. If we don't abide in Him, if we don't continue to dwell with Him, if we grow apart, from each other, as well as from Him, or wander off, we'll eventually wither and die! Without me, says the Lord, you are just a bundle of fruitless branches! And a fruitless branch, in case you've forgotten, is not only useless, but also sucks the life out of the rest of the Vine! So, because I care about the whole Vineyard, because I'm concerned with the entire harvest, I will come along and cut off the dead weight and toss it into the fire!

That's more than a bit troubling, isn't it? It's a very clear warning! This lesson of Jesus is a good news/bad news thing! There is safety and security here in the Vineyard, a home for all time, if we so choose—where we can be vibrant, growing, beautiful branches, who can ask the Father for whatever we wish! Did you catch that part of the text? Verse seven. Or, we can be dead, shriveled up, fruitless branches, destined to be plucked away, destined for the flame! And it's our choice! “Remain in Me, and I will remain you.”

What Jesus describes here, is “Selective Pruning”. You don't just buy a packet of seeds, dump the entire thing into the ground, cover it with dirt, water and fertilize it, and then wait to see what comes up! Not if you want a decent harvest! That would have disappointing results! The instructions on the package clearly talk about thinning-out the new sprouts when they germinate. Otherwise, you'll only get a meager yield! The plants will compete for the precious nutrients in the ground, and completely choke-off the sunlight from each other. Planting, like that, is a gross waste of seeds! If you don't thin, and prune, your plants won't bear much fruit!

We see that too, here in Northern Michigan. Just look at how much work the farmers are doing right now, trimming back the fruit trees. Every Orchard or Vineyard owner prunes, and cleans, and thins their plants! It's the only way to produce more fruit! And all of those dead, useless branches, are gathered up and tossed into the flame! They are not much good for anything else. The trimming fosters new growth and allows the production of better fruit.

A couple of days ago, I was trimming some grape vines on a trellis by my deck. I originally planted them for shade, which works, even if you let them grow untethered! But Deb, who is far wiser than I am, wants to see some fruit on those vines! So, I had to do some work. I needed to cut back the unruly parts. And there were "sucker shoots" starting, tight little clusters of new growth that shouldn't be there. These tend to collect dirt and debris. They open up the plant to potential disease. If these shoots are allowed to grow, they will actually suck the life out of the rest of the vine! There will be leaves! The plant may look good for a while. That is, until it withers and dies! And in the meantime, there won't be any fruit! A Vineyard like that, is just "for show"!

And those unruly, "extra" branches will weigh everything down! They will actually collect all kinds of stuff that shouldn't be there! Mine, for instance, gathered a bunch of snow this winter, and then tore-down half of my pergola! It wasn't designed for that kind of weight, that kind of stress!

“I am the true vine,” declares the Lord, “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.” And make note here, if you will. It’s the “fruitful” branches that get the pruning. All the “non-fruitful” branches are cut off and tossed away. It is the “fruitful” branches, which stay connected to the Vine, that get the care! The Greek word for pruning here is *katharos*. It has the same root as the word “catharsis” or “cathartic”. It means to cleanse or purify. I wonder if that might change our perspective some? Is it possible that some of the difficult things that come our way are actually pruning, intended to cleanse and purify, designed to help us grow and produce even more fruit?

Notice also that all of this Vineyard care has a purpose! Verse eight says that the reason for this, “is for my Father’s Glory”! It’s not about production rates, is it, or yield-per-acre! It’s about honoring the owner of the farm! Not every branch will produce the same amount of fruit! The quantity, or even the quality, is not the point! The fruit, any fruit, is intended for God’s Glory! And it’s not up to you to even produce the fruit! Your job is to stay connected to the Vine! Because if you do, says Jesus, you WILL produce fruit!

Obviously, I’ve been watching Orchards and Vineyards this week. And I couldn’t help but think about “grafting”, particularly, about being “grafted onto” the Body of Christ. Each one of our own little branches, by design, will produce our own specific “type” of fruit! The life-giving nutrients all come from the same Vine. We have shared DNA that flows through us, the power and strength, the life-blood of the Holy Spirit!

This is what allows us to produce the fruit, of course. But whatever “fruit” the Lord wants us to produce! Just stay connected, then, and let the Owner of the Vineyard deal with the Harvest!

I think it’s pretty easy for most of us to stroll through the Vineyard and try to identify useless branches. We see the dead weight, or think we do. And we want to prune, too, so that fruit will blossom and grow! We might notice some “sucker shoots” draining away energy and resources—unproductive areas of the Vineyard! That’s all fairly easy for us to see if we pay attention! But the lesson in this text, the focus of what Jesus is saying, is not on the Vineyard! It’s always easy to throw stones at that! It’s big, and bulky, and made up of “other people”! It’s easy to throw stones into the Vineyard! Again, usually from far away! But the focus here, in this lesson from Jesus, is actually our own particular branch! The questions are all really much closer to home!

So, what might be “sprouting”, in your life, that needs to be cleaned out? Where might mold and decay be gathering by you? What healthy-looking “new shoots”, or great big branches that have been around a long time, are actually blocking out the Light of Son from where you currently stand? Where might there be “too much foliage”, stuff that simply needs to be cut back, in order to not “suck the life” out of the entire vine? That kind of pruning takes work! It does! And discernment! But the results will bring an amazing yield! And all of God’s people said, Amen!

PASTORAL PRAYER

We wish to follow you Lord. Yet so often we stumble in our pursuit. We truly want to hear your voice and faithfully answer your call. We want to be your disciples Lord, those who learn, and grow, and bear much fruit. So please, Father, breathe on us right now the life-giving breath of your Spirit, so that we may do these things, and glorify your name!

Lord you have blessed us far beyond what we deserve, and you continue to do so even now. You have allowed us to reap where we have not sown. You have brought people into our lives that have helped us mature and grow, in truly amazing ways. And you have given us each other, the Church, the Body of Christ, so that our roots can intertwine and we can fight off the storms. So, move us now, in Jesus' name, to bear much fruit.

Help us to heal ourselves and to heal others in Jesus' name. Help us to spread peace with the power of the Holy Spirit, and to love with your love in all that we say and do. Help us to share the fruit that you produce through us, and in us, all to your Glory Lord, to bring light into the dark places in our world.

Father, we lift up this war-torn planet to you, asking that you bathe us in peace. We lift up our leaders, Lord, and those in positions of influence and power, asking for your guidance in their lives, your insight for their minds, and your love filling their hearts. And we lift up your church, Lord, the people sitting on each side of us, and the ones sitting in front and in back of us. We ask for special blessings on them Lord, blessings that they can take and share with those they meet. And we also ask for you to smile upon those we lift up right now. Father, we place before you..... We lift up all these people and all these things in the Name of our Risen Savior, as we pray together now the very prayer that He taught us saying, Our Father...