



Growing on the Vine

May 9, 2021

Sixth Sunday of Easter

John 15:1-10; 1 John 4:7-21

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All around us vines bud and begin to grow. In gardens, woodsy parks, or wild preserves. Philodendron drapes above my desk. Virginia creeper spreads over fallen logs. English ivy clings on the side of the house or cascades down a stand inside. Myrtle carpets a hillside with periwinkle blooms. Then there's those thorny briars ripped out with thick leather gloves and soaking sweat. Jesus surely didn't those have in mind! Nor the benign-looking underground shoots I pulled up two springs ago, clearing ground for a labyrinth. Days later angry welts lined my arms – belatedly warning or scolding: it's poison ivy! Many vines snake through our lives.

When Jesus says "I am the true vine," picture grapes lining hills long ago. Much like vineyards we drive by. I love the powerfully pungent memory from youth of early autumn air dense with scent of ripe grapes hanging heavy. Go and bear much fruit, Jesus says. That's what Jesus might want us to imagine. That's sensual inspiration he wants us to feel, sniff, savor, to offer others and the world. Friends, that's the good witness in all the ways we serve. We could spend a lot of time together celebrating our support and connections with many groups in our community and causes around the world, past and present. The list is long. Passions are strong. Commitments persist. Our ripe fruit feeds and seeds and interweaves with many other bountiful efforts. That scent of faithful service is what many people like you say attracts them to our life together.

In many ways, evangelism and service are the ultimate purpose of our living faith. So, John tells us Jesus tried to inspire and empower his closest friends and followers the night before he died. The Great Master Gardener calls us to keep dressing our vines of Holy Love. God wants all people to share that abundant life —all races, conditions, religions, categories of culture. Evangelize, spread good news! You know, I've heard many speakers and read books about best practices and secrets of evangelism success. Do these seven steps, use this proven method and numbers will grow, pews will fill, programs, groups, money will flow. Amid little nuggets here or there, it seems artificial, superficial to me. No, we Presbyterians are not the best at marketing and inviting others to share the goodness we know. We need to do more.

Still, whatever techniques or tips, friends, what matters most is our core character of relationship. How we care for each other in need. How we treat one another when we disagree. How grateful we are for actions, contributions, intentions offered. How humbly generous we are with dreams, desires, decisions for the good of others. I wonder how we're feeling that loving connection right now—strong or struggling? It doesn't take a rocket scientist or acclaimed consultant to tell us when there's meaning, purpose, comfort, joy, something good going on among us others will join. And when there isn't, it doesn't matter how flashy or organized, we can't deceive; people will leave. Just be who God wants us to be. Sometimes someone says: seems you really want to be like Jesus. Well ... yeah.

In the bit of the book we discussed this week, Barbara Brown Taylor talks about relating with people of other faiths—how we can grow more faithful, learning from other religions. Often in our tradition, Taylor laments Christians can have a seductively combative, thinly-veiled condemning approach to evangelism. She remembers Gandhi's distress about missionary tactics he saw. Rather he preferred the "evangelism of the rose." It simply spreads its fragrance and allows people to

respond as they will.ⁱ Maybe Jesus would have talked about the fragrance of the vine. The dense scent of ripe grapes hanging heavy.

I pulled off by a vineyard this week. Got out for a closer look. We're a long way from bunches of purple fruit. Buds about bloom, leaves about to burst—growing season begins. And it's clear how newer shoots were cut, pruned, to sprout off the old gnarled, trusty, sturdy vine. So more than savoring and celebrating fruits of our life together, friends, makes me ponder this week how we grow on the vine toward bearing fruit. How we ripen faithfully so the fragrance of Holy Love among us is strong, attractive.

I am the true vine, Jesus said. Abide in me, in my love in order to bear fruit. Here's a horticultural highlight. In Jesus' time, grape vines were actually many smaller branches tied together. Shoots burst out of a common stump. Then twist and grow around each other so they all can stand together and bear the weight of fruitfulness where they would not be able to alone. However we've grown in God's grace for decades in this place, in other denominations or none at all here God entwines our lives. God tills up the soil of this congregation, transplants us as friends in Jesus, with the hope of an ever-greater harvest. And the miracle of this vine is that new shoots come out to bear more fruit.

And every branch that already bears fruit will be pruned to bear more fruit ... whether in a moment of loving correction or over decades. Friends, what needs to be pruned in us? Maybe attempts to grow or keep going in ways not possible that only serve to perturb us. Maybe condemnation we've received or expectations we perceive from others that withers and deadens our spirit. Maybe frustration with certain decisions or actions with which we don't agree which keep pricking our skin, even like a thorn splintered and stuck in. Maybe self-doubt or arrogance, self-centeredness and insecurity that may cause our branch to swell up and squeeze out

the life and fruit of others on the vine. Let's try to let God prune us with help of a little listening grace from another friend in Christ.

You see, for St. John, who wrote the gospel and the letter we'll read soon, living faith is never about us alone, on our own. It's ever about thriving in community more than individual accomplishment. Every "you" pronoun Jesus uses here is plural. Hebrew scripture often imagines our faithfulness together as God's vineyard in the world. As we get to know and learn from Jesus, the Great Vinedresser, we're pruned not just for the good of *our personal* fruits and abilities. We're pruned so that *another branch* can entwine itself better, and together we bear even more and abundant fruit. As we agreed when we chatted this week, we all need other perspectives beyond our own, which can often be too narrow, and when left alone inevitably twisted. We all have low points needing comfort and help—a teen thinking of ending life, an older adult facing diagnosis, so many grieving losses and transitions in relationships, jobs, homes. We have our joys, beauties, hopes and possibilities to savor with others. What makes it hard for us to abide? Trust, love one another,

That's what John tries to nurture in his letters. Maybe the vine imagery doesn't quite connect with our everyday reality. If so, maybe imagine communal music, something like a symphony, marching band, big band jazz, grand chorus, or congregational hymns sung strong. Melodies of grace passed along so every person learns them. Harmonies of peace and beauty that stir the spirit. We're humming now... consider it practice for the time when again we'll sing out strong. Like pruning, maybe we need to cut back our voice, our volume so others can be heard in finer balance. We need to get *our hearts* in tune with Sacred Purpose so no sour notes come out. And we need *to attune ourselves to others* until we know them, until we know the beauty of God's love song in them *by heart*. Because, when we accept the call to be partners in Christ's service side by side, friend with friend,

equal partners in caring, ever increasing compassion, then their beautiful voice comes out. And then somehow God gently prunes all of us, even when we're already fruitful.

On this day the fragrance of flowers will likely be strong as we give thanks for and celebrate all the ways we've been loved by matriarchs, grammies and omas, mother figures of all kinds in our lives. In that spirit it seems a meaningful chance to uplift women's loving leadership in the church. From earliest leaders like Mary Magdalene and Lydia, through Julian and Theresa, Hildegard and Clare, Dorothy Day, Dolores Williams, many other scholars, officers of our denomination including five of the last six moderators, and the well-established lineage of women leaders in our congregation. You may know the first woman minister ordained in the Presbyterian Church served our congregation. And Marg Towner still joins our Zoom coffee hours sometimes from Florida! And she opened the door through which a long line of other women entered over the years, including a bountiful handful now. Old rules and limitations were pruned to remove dead weight and make room for the many ways women and men can share all ministries of the church. And still, friends, we know we have room to grow together, as motherly love will one day lead in the highest positions of our country, our community, and this congregation.

That growth of the vine, the musical ensemble, whatever other image works for you ... John's inspiration for the earliest Christians we're about to share together is no complex argument. He uses simple language, often quite repetitive. More than a puzzle to work out with our minds, you see, he tries to get the promise to sink into our hearts. He tries to get us to really taste the ripe goodness God offers, to savor, and gratefully to generously share the juicy fruits with others. Or again like music, listen for common refrains, a kind of melodic theme on which he keeps playing variations. Hear again what the Spirit may say. {read 1 John 4:7-21}

We love because God first loved us. We abide in God, as we love other siblings / friends in Christ. No fear. No need to prove perfection. Rather our lives are perfected, that is, made whole and complete, as we receive this gift joyfully and are set free to live abundantly – with boldness, John says, on the “day of judgment” ... that is, every day, every moment pregnant with meaning and possibility.

Maybe John’s letter is like an email from Chrissy and I received from Pat a few days ago. The Women’s Thursday Morning Bible Study offered personal testimonies around important parts of Christian community. As they shared about what they cherished about our life together, they kept coming back to the following that seem to define the character of our congregation:

Bearing and sharing one another’s burdens and joys, loving as we’ve been loved.

We are not created to be alone. To be vital, we need each other to live, serve and seek the Holy – together

Supportive of each other in daily life and times of crisis.

Making and holding space in faith that is never fully formed

How Jesus wants us to operate – sharing, worshiping and working together discovering, developing, serving and experiencing wonder and grace in ways that would not happen if we were going it alone.

Fully inclusive wholeness, unconditional love, and wellness, including Anti-racist efforts, caring as Christ cared.

A group of imperfect folks trying to follow the will of God together.

Friends who are really family capable of walking with each other in the good times and the hard times.

No, dear friends, fellow branches on the vine, we’re not perfect. Dense ripe grapes hanging heavy on the vine of Christ aspirationally inspire us. Smell the fragrance. Savor the fruit. Go serve by seeding another vine starting another variation on the

tune of holy love and entwine it here among us. Maybe it's best to humbly consider ourselves like the vines in fields right now, pruned, budding, about to bloom. May we ever grow toward how the Holy Christ calls us partner in the service of Love Divine, All Loves Excelling.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Holy Envy* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 59.