

Knowing our Soil

Menno Mennonite Church
May 2, 2021

Purpose: To connect the ability to abide in Christ to see the growth that God gives.

Message: As we are rooted in Christ, we are invited to trust God's tending for our fruitfulness.

Scripture: John 15: 1-8

Synopsis: This sermon of Jesus' is a tough one. Coming as it does at the end of his ministry, and part of this far more extensive catalog concerning who he is and what he is about, it is part consolation (abide in me) and part threat (any part that does not bear fruit...). We keep these two themes well separate because they seem so antithetical and disconcerting as we ask ourselves "are we fruitful enough" even as we attempt to abide in hope.

Yet these themes are not as antithetical as they might seem. A well tended vine is one that does what it is meant to do: to bear fruit, to be what it was planted to be. The grapes take on the characteristics of where and how they are planted and give the flavor of that place, what ever it is. As a church, it is easy to carry a lot of apprehension of whether we are enough. Yet, when we know the work of the vine keeper, maintaining and bringing all things to growth and to good, we can trust the fruit will come in God's good time.

<https://mailchi.mp/christiancentury/sc-free-350975a-352096?e=bb2eb3579c>

https://cep.calvinseminary.edu/sermon-starters/easter-5b-3/?type=the_lectionary_gospel

<https://www.christiancentury.org/article/living-word/may-2-easter-5b-john-151-8?code=Q6Iuu65Ov13kcoQCGXdA>

John 15:1–9 (NRSV)

¹“I am the true vine,
and my Father YHWH is the vinegrower.

²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.
Every branch that bears fruit God prunes
to make it bear more fruit.

³You have already been cleansed
by the word that I have spoken to you.

⁴Abide in me as I abide in you.

Just as the branch cannot bear fruit
by itself unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me.

⁵I am the vine, you are the branches.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away
like a branch and withers;
such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,
ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

⁸God is glorified by this,

that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

⁹As the Father has loved me,
so I have loved you;

abide in my love.

There is little doubt that the way we eat has changed. Gone are the days where you can put “Lettuce” on a shopping list, give it your significant other, and be absolutely certain that you will receive precisely what you had in mind, at least if it is a round, high water content leaf vegetable. We now have almost infinite variety of color, taste, and texture available on demand all the time. Our coffee, chocolate, and tea is now categorized by continent and geography as much as its caffeine content, noting the subtleties of growth and origin. As much as I revel in my “thanks, I take my coffee black” without a whole lot of interest in the pedigree before bean meets water, or the backstory of how it got extruded into my cup (I have yet figure out how to just get an ordinary drip from Starbucks), there is a level of interest that comes with the world of the aficionado that really gets into this stuff. The ethos of land to table has caught on, even if those who are consuming the end product still have a lot to learn about the nitty gritty of how it all works, a category I unreservedly assign myself to, knowing enough to at least acknowledge I know nothing. There is a connection to the meaning and context of our food that has become a preoccupation as we have become more aware and interested in the ways that soil, air, water, and climate go into shaping the flavors that we enjoy on the other end.

My purpose here is not really to po po this trend, despite wondering in despair now and again what the world has come to for it. Epicurean tastes are well and good, but I do occasionally wonder what we lose when we forget that all food is a blessing to be grateful for, even that which may not have the same provenance as others. That aside, we have learned that the conditions of growing make a huge difference to the end results. Last summer, I read any number of articles speculating as to what the weeks of smoke would do to the produce in the fields at that time. Time, place, and circumstance are huge, and the more we learn, the more influence that the flavor of the land seems to have on the flavors and richness of the end product. The regions and rocks that add that certain something to the end product is called terroir, and I understand that this can be a highly specific discipline of making things what they are. It is one of the crucial variables in the process. A bit more elevation, a higher degree of limestone and all the rest and you have something completely different from another.

Our scripture for this morning puts us in mind of such things, or at least it might were we to give it the time. This text, an excerpt from the departure sermon that Jesus offers his disciples, rests entirely on this metaphor where vine growing is the primary mover and shaker along the way. “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,

because apart from me you can do nothing.” There are few clearer utilizations of metaphors than that, especially on the part of Jesus. It is the wonderful way that Jesus connects his disciples to the growing metaphor of the work he was leaving them to do and to be about. The take away is clear, or at least we often treat as such: we are to bear fruit, and those who do not bear fruit will be pruned and disposed of; end of story.

This translates into an expression of our ongoing anxiety about what it means to be and do church, and the work of being the church. Most often we associate fruit with harvest whose primary metric is of course quantity—the mass of reproduction and addition that comes along here. As important and growth and outreach is and always will be, I wonder what other ways we might come to appreciate the fruitfulness of the life of the vine? Where might Jesus be calling us into faithful following where we are sustained by the life of the vine?

There are a couple of things to note here from the text itself that point us in this direction. The first is the explicit, yet often overlooked fact that our role is that of the vine who abides in Christ. We are not the vintner, looking for branches to cut or the places to prune. We are not the roots to which the whole operation clings to. We are to be the vine through which and out of which the way of Christ flows and moves. That is all. Second, it is tempting, if not knee jerk to read every reference of Jesus pruning and putting the less productive pieces to the flame as an insipid threat. It is where our minds go when we think of the judgement of who is in and who is out. We assume, with evidence, that the test is “are you productive?” and failing that the ax falls. I think everyone of my age set recalls the struggle of what to do with those records/tapes/CDs which would doom us all when it came time to learn of the evils of popular music. I know that I was hit with an enormously guilty conscious when it came to my single “WHAM” album. Yet as I have grown in faith and, one hopes, wisdom, I have begun to wonder what of these responsibilities are mine, and what are those the belong to Christ. Yet remember: it is not produce or else; every branch is pruned to maximize fruitfulness. That is the work of becoming the healthier plants we are meant to be.

Spending any time around the vineyard that is the church will make you aware of one thing: almost everyone has a plan and strategy to make all of this work. There are endless gatherings, strategies, books, programs, and all the rest each one promising that if a given group follows their particular 5 easy steps, fruitfulness will abound almost instantly. The formulas are many and varied, but they come down to pretty much the same thing—that fruitfulness (read

numeric success) is a matter of our diligence in bearing fruit and finding the right tricks to change the fortunes of what ever location is being described. The trouble with that is that it ignores those aspects of the terroir—the circumstances of the location that makes a particular part of the vine what it is where it is. Note that Jesus speaks about pruning the vine that it might bear more, better fruit. These are words of promise and protection far more than they are about threat of shaping up and flying right. The invitation that he was offering was one to remain in the way and ethos of Christ--the things that connect us to the true vine—and allowing that connection to bear fruit in the ways and means of being Christ in the world and for each other.

As much as we would love to be and long to be the biggest harvest and the largest fruit, we make a mistake to think that the vine can only produce quantity, and not quality. The fruit of Christ with us is present in all of our ways and all of our lives provided that we remain in the way of Christ, knowing that it in him and through him all things take life. We bear the fruit of hospitality when we welcome home the many for whom Menno is just that: home, no matter how long and how far they have been away. We extend the branches of caring when we recognize the needs of each other and care for each other in ways big and small throughout the body. We capture the nature and essence of place and meaning when we share beyond ourselves in service and fellowship through MCA, Disaster clean up, and so much more. We bear the fruit of compassion when we chose to care for the least of these in ourselves and our community in times such like this, even when we are more than ready to just be done with it all. All this and so much more is the working of God in Christ, and is the fruitfulness of deep roots, and of allowing Christ to remain our vine, our companion, our stay. Fruit abounds, each with its unique and particular flavor of place and time that we do well to know, appreciate, and cultivate the best we can.

At the end of the day, the vine branch does not, of its own volition “make grapes”. It does not exist on its priority list, nor is accomplished by scheme, strategy or just plain luck. The fruit comes solely because it is part of the vine, and is part of what God is doing already. Fruitfulness is in the nature of the vine. It produces the good fruit that it is meant to be. Never will it be pears or avocados or kumquats or the exotic fruits of the day. The vine is Jesus and the fruit will always be that of faith hope and love, borne of life in the Spirit. That is the promise of life in the Spirit; that no matter what happens in the world around us, no threat, no challenge, no

adversity or anything else will limit fruit being produced so long as we continue to abide in the one true vine who is the author of it all.

I wonder what the fruit that we are being invited to see in our midst in this moment. As we transition into more and more of what we are more accustomed to, there is time where we will more quickly recognize the fruit of our life together. Yet I wonder if there are elements of the Menno fruit that we want to recognize more clearly and call out as ours? In what ways has being a congregation with deep roots in the precious soil flavored our life together? What is the characteristic tang of the desert soil, and how do we offer that to the best of our ability? In other words, where do we find that which makes us, us, and value that as part of the gift we have to give to the world? How is God inviting us to abide in the vine now, inviting us to stick close to the vine, and to know the branches that are ours? Where are our points of pruning, and the new shoots of growth?

These may not be questions ready to answer right away or, for that matter, clearly now at all. But as with every time, we are called to know God's good growth in all things, at all times, valuing the growth, knowing the fruit that is ours, and giving thanks for the flavors of this place that have been brought to the fore as the work of God with continues here and for ever more.

May we know our full flavors, abiding in the vine, and trusting always the good gardener to bring forth the growth of God's kingdom forever more. Amen.