

Today’s lesson is read from John 15:1-11

Hear the words from John:

Read John 15:1-11

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

So, this morning I want to do something I have never done before, a sermon series. What that means is today and the next two weeks I want to take you all through John 15 and break down what Jesus means by bearing fruit and abiding in the vine.

Today I want us to only focus on the vine grower in the text, then the next two Sundays we’ll discuss the true vine and the branches, just to give you all an overview.

Looking at the text this morning, John makes it pretty clear that this is another one of Jesus’s sayings. At first glance it seems like a parable, but it’s actually not. No other gospel writer has this saying from Jesus recorded in their accounts. Therefore its best described as a metaphor as understood in verse 1, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” This is not a simile, Jesus doesn’t say I am like or my Father is like. He says I am, and my Father is. My Father IS the vinegrower, in other translations God IS the vinedresser. And as the vinegrower, God “removes every branch in Jesus that bears no fruit. Even braches that bear fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

So yesterday Kendall and I were listening to another murder mystery podcast called S-Town. Its an investigative journalism podcast hosted by Brian Reed and created by the producers of Serial and This American Life. Not going into all the details, it

mainly follows a rather interesting and eccentric man named John B. McLemore in nowhere Woodstock, Alabama; population of about 1,400. John B, as they call him, is both a horologist and a horticulturist. As a horologist, he is one of 300 people in the nation that can expertly fix any clock by studying its inner mechanics. His fascination of the study of time lead him to create his own astrolabe, an elaborate measuring tool that was used in the ancient near east to identify stars and planets, latitude and longitude, and local time. As a horticulturist, he cultivated and managed his own rose garden that he turned into an elaborate maze. And while listening to the podcast I wondered to myself why anyone would be interested in those two fields. Meticulously and diligently working on the inner mechanisms of a clock and patiently everyday growing and maintaining an acre rose garden maze. And then John B. says these words as he’s pruning the plants. He says with a sad voice, its tedious and brief work. Tedious and brief.

Now I’ve never pruned a thing in my life, but pruning does sound like tedious and brief work. The beauty that comes from the maintenance, but that the maintenance is monotonous is understandable. Then I wondered if that is how God feels. Does God feel that pruning us, the branches, those abiding in the vine with Christ is a tedious and brief task?

In John Wesley’s commentary notes on John 15, he cross references it with Hebrews 12:10-11 which says, the Lord disciplines those that he loves which leads to the peaceable fruit of righteousness. In other words, the disciplining that God does is also the pruning God does for those he loves. He even disciplines and prunes those who are bearing fruit now so that they may bear more fruit in the future.

Some I would say, God disciplines more than others, prunes more than others. Maybe God has pruned some fruit from you? Taken away good fruit from you? Maybe God has pruned good fruit by taking a loved one, a mother, father, spouse, or child? Maybe God has good pruned fruit by taking away your ability to walk or do something that you once were able to do?

It's easy to read this passage as one of judgment and threat. But I think the thrust of the passage is promise. Why? Because it all has to do with context. First, the context of the narrative: Jesus is offering these words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He knows what is going to happen – both to himself and to his flock – and they do not. They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting but that they will survive, even flourish. The second context is that of the community for which John writes. Because by the time they hear these words they have already been scattered, likely thrown out of their synagogue, and have had plenty of reason to feel like they've been abandoned. But John writes to assure them that while they have indeed been cut, it is the pruning for more abundant fruit and life.

No doubt that was hard to believe, as there was precious little evidence available to the disciples or John's community that they had not been abandoned. And no doubt it is still hard to believe on our end as well, as so much of life simply tears at us with no evidence that it is toward some more fruitful future. But amid this uncertainty and distress, Jesus still invites us – actually, not just invites but promises us – that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us like a vine clings to a tree so that we endure, persevere, and even flourish among these present difficulties.

Here’s the thing: if Jesus had only said, “abide in me or else,” that would be a different matter. But it’s not. “Abide in me,” Jesus says, “as I abide in you.” This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise, that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens, God in Jesus will bring all things to a good end.

Which is not to say, by the way, that everything happens for a reason. Rather, it is to say that no matter what happens, we have God’s promise in Jesus to work for good. Keep in mind, after all, that these words are said just before Jesus goes to the cross. And I would argue that the cross was not simply a part of some larger plan, but rather the chief example of God’s commitment to be the Master Gardener and get dirty in the very place that seems most devoid of life, growth, and hope.

The cross was not the instrument that made it possible for God to love us, the cross is evidence and testimony to just how much God already loved us and God’s promise to be with us through all things. Just so, the resurrection is the promise that no matter how much tragedy we endure, these hardships will not have the last word.

This is a hard passage for some of us to hear. But let’s also be honest and confess that this can be a hard life to live, and at times it’s helpful to hear once again that the suffering we endure is not wasteful cutting but pruning for a more abundant future and, that no matter what happens, Jesus will not abandon us. God the Master Gardener will continue to prune and grow us.

Let us pray: