

## GRAPE EXPECTATIONS!

Isn't it interesting that the love of planting flowers seems to move from generation to generation? Cary got his love of flowers from his grandmother, spending hours with her planting and caring for them.. When she died, Cary salvaged some plants to bring to our house. While the peonies are long gone, the poppies still delight us.

When Christopher was young, we bought our flowers at "Green Sautters," as Christopher called it. We loaded the wheelbarrow with flats of flowers to plant at our house around the mailbox, sidewalk and pool.

And now James is part of the fun. Perhaps you remember the story of James helping Grandpa Cary plant flowers last spring. Cary dug the hole, James put the plant in the hole, and they both patted the dirt in around it. Then James "blew" on each geranium. Perhaps this year Grandpa can take James to Green Sautters to help buy the flowers that he and Grandpa plant.

In John 15, Jesus talked to his disciples about plants in the familiar words of vines, branches, and fruit. The discussion took place in the Upper Room—the event we call the Last Supper. The disciples were relaxed after a meal of fresh bread, roasted lamb with onions, and wine. Jesus had already washed their feet. He told them again that coming to Jerusalem meant a cross, not a crown—and they still didn't get it. Last of all, Jesus wanted the disciples to know how he will relate to them when he's gone. He illustrated that relationship by talking about a vine and its branches!

### THE VINE AND BRANCHES

Jesus made two "I am" statements to the disciples in the Upper Room. First he said, "I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer." A few verses later, Jesus continues, "I am the Vine, you are the Branches." Grape vineyards were very common in Galilee, and the disciples understood the work of a vine grower. Some branches are thick and gnarled from producing grapes year after year. Other branches are young and growing. New growth or old, the vinegrower cares for each according to its needs.

In a small book called *Secrets of the Vine*, I found this dialogue between the author, Bruce Wilkinson, and a vineyard owner. Bruce says:

"As we sat across the restaurant table from each other, the vineyard owner talked about the life of a grower—the long hours spent walking the vineyards, tending the grapes, watching the fruit develop, waiting for the perfect day to begin harvest.

"New branches have a natural tendency to trail down and grow along the ground," the vine-grower explained. "But they don't bear fruit

down there. When branches grow along the ground, the leaves get coated in dust. When it rains, they get muddy and mildewed. The branch becomes sick and useless."

"What do you do?" Bruce asked. "Cut it off and throw it away?" "Oh, no!" he exclaimed. "The branch is much too valuable for that. We go through the vineyard with a bucket of water looking for those branches. We lift them up and wash them off!" He demonstrated for me with dark, calloused hands. "Then we wrap them around the trellis or tie them up. Pretty soon they're thriving."

Father Farmer takes care of his tender vines, coaxing them to grow and produce fruit. He has GRAPE EXPECTATIONS of those branches. As the branch grows, he expects to harvest overflowing baskets of grapes!

Jesus continues, "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." Last year, Cary's office hired a company to prune the bushes and shrubs in a special garden on the property. Also the men were supposedly professionals, but Cary wondered about that when he saw the results of their work. Every bush and shrub in the very carefully planned garden looked shorn, severely pruned. Cary feared the garden would never look the same.

Thankfully, Jesus isn't talking about this kind of indiscriminate pruning. Yet, mature branches do need a more radical approach than simple leaf-washing. Vigorous grapevines produce a lot of woody growth, which prevents the sun from reaching the place where grapes should grow. Since the purpose of a vineyard is a harvest of grapes, that wood is cut back. These mature branches are pruned!

Jesus implies that pruning is part of the relationship he has with us. Why do we need to be pruned? Because a life that grows out of control destroys itself. An unpruned life becomes scattered and overextended by busy schedules and unfocused priorities. It spreads its energy indiscriminately to every activity, compromising its strength and ability to be fruitful. On the other hand, a life that is pruned is forced back to its Source of life, Jesus Christ, where it is strengthened and enabled to produce fruits of the Spirit.

#### ABIDING IN THE VINE

Whether we talk about physical or spiritual branches, fruit is expected. But if the branch is separated from the vine, bearing fruit is not possible. Jesus promised that "if you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit." What does "Abide" mean? *The Message* translates it, "make your home in me." It's a reciprocal offer--"if you make your home in me, I will make my home in you." Isn't interesting that we tell guests, "Make yourself at home"? "At home" is where we receive the love and nourishment and pruning needed to be thriving and productive Christians.

Meister Eckhard illustrates our relationship with God by two circles. It's makes a perfect image of abiding. I've come to use this image when I pray. Sometimes I see myself as the small circle within God, the big circle. Sometimes I see God as the small circle within me, the big circle. That is, I make my home in God, and God makes his home in me.

#### GETTING IT BACKWARD

I saw a video cartoon of a small boy who did everything backwards. He brushed his teeth, and then he squeezed out the toothpaste and left it on the sink. He poured some milk, and then got out a glass. He put on his clothes, dried himself off with a towel, and then jumped into the pool. The way his friend saw it, that's plain dumb!

Sometimes God sees us doing things backward, too. We try to produce fruit before we're connected to the vine. We interpret the Bible without studying it. We make our own plans and then hope that God will bless them. Like the backward boy's friend said, that's plain dumb!

There are pruning agents available to revitalize our life in God, and scripture is one. *The Message* tells us in 2 Timothy 3:16, "Every part of scripture is God-breathed and useful one way or another – showing us truth, exposing our rebellion, correcting our mistakes, training us to love God's way. Through the Word we are put together and shaped up for the tasks God has for us." Sounds like pruning to me! Without reading and reflecting on scripture for ourselves, we are stuck in our spoon-fed assumptions and half-truths. But when we make our home in God, we experience a fresh, life-giving relationship that cleans us up, trims us off, and shapes us to produce fruit.

Prayer can also prune us. Our self-attention needs to be pruned back so that we can be attentive to God. Jesus said, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." I think that means, when we are in tune with God's intentions, what we want is what God wants!

Anthony de Mello tells the story about a Hasidic Jew who had gone to market without his prayer book. On the way home, his cart broke down, and he was distressed that the day would end without his prayers. Finally he prayed, "I have done something very foolish, Lord. I left home this morning without my prayer book, and my memory is such that I can't remember a single prayer without it. So this is what I'm going to do. I'm going to recite the alphabet five times very slowly, and you, to whom all prayers are known, can put the letters together to form the prayers I can't remember." And the Lord said to his angels, "Of all the prayers I have heard today, this one was undoubtedly the best because it came from a heart that was simple and sincere."

I don't recommend saying the alphabet when you pray, but if we abide in God and God in us, our prayers might sound different. If we prayed every day, "God, what are you up to, and how can I help you," I wonder if the world be in such a mess?

There are many forms of pruning. Sometimes we need the pruning of confession and repentance. Sometimes pruning comes head-on through difficult and unbidden circumstances of life. Sometimes we escape death or tragedy in such a miraculous way that we can only respond in thanksgiving and gratitude. In whatever form it comes, pruning helps us become healthy, fruitful branches in God's Vineyard.

#### CONCLUSION

"I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you in a relationship that's intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated from me, you can't produce a thing."

The most important word in this sermon is abide, or join with, or make your home in me. In the NRSV translation, the word abide appears at least 9 times in the Gospel of John and no less than 19 times in 1 John.

I think God is trying to tell us something. We can plug our lamp or laptop into a power strip, but unless the cord is plugged into the wall socket, there's no power.

I am guilty of doing the backward thing in preparing this sermon. I studied the scripture, gathered some illustrations and key ideas, and sat down to write the sermon. I edited it and re-edited it *ad nauseum*. Yesterday in going over the sermon, I couldn't get a sense of peace. I realized that although I had plugged into the power strip of preparation, I hadn't plugged into the socket, Jesus Christ, where the power of the message comes from. I had to ask forgiveness for trying to give God's message without asking God what it was.

Creekside can do all the right things a church should do, but unless we're aware of the real power source, and choose to be connected, our mission will fall flat.

Philip Yancey notes that a branch bears fruit not by striving or agonizing, but by simply abiding or resting. God has GRAPE EXPECTATIONS of us – to abide and bear fruit. The fruit will grow if we remain attached to the vine. So – hang on!