

Providence Presbyterian Church  
Rev. David Pettit  
April 25<sup>th</sup>, 2021  
John 15: 1-8 and Psalm 1

Metaphors. Drawing upon subject A to say or convey something about subject B. Last week our gospel and our psalm focused on the metaphor of shepherding and how the metaphor was employed and expressed in several ways to evoke and convey the dramatic love of God. This week our gospel and psalm continue to express through metaphor, but this time in the realm of agriculture. The shepherding metaphor conveyed God's lovingkindness, both the protection and provision and connection of care. The agricultural metaphors are employed to focus on another aspect of this faith journey—our need for continual connection to the source of life.

Now metaphors are usually employed to highlight or nuance or open ways of thinking about something in particular. Not all aspects of the metaphor apply. It is not an allegory where there is one for one correspondence with different aspects of the metaphor. For example, when Psalm 1 likens the righteous or faithful leader to a tree, the psalmist is not suggesting we are stationary with our feet in the ground. But by drawing upon this natural imagery, the psalmist is likening the faithful life to the tree, focusing on two key aspects. One: its leaves are always green no matter what the climate or season or weather is doing around it. Two: the reason for this continual green is that the roots reach down to the water.

Plants in an arid environment adapt and survive through different strategies. A cactus holds its moisture. Other plants go dormant in dry seasons. But the Acacia tree adapts differently. The Acacia tree pictured on our bulletin is likely the type of tree the psalmist refers to. It survives because its roots go deep to where the water is beneath the ground. These two aspects, its always-green leaves and deep-rooted connection, are highlighted through the contrast in verse 4. The green tree is contrasted with the chaff. The chaff is like the tumbleweeds that blow around the Colorado plains on windy days. For these have both lost their connection and lost their fruit. They are consequently blown about by the wind, rootless and fruitless.

These twin images both connote emotional or spiritual states that I suspect we can all relate to or recall moments of. On the one hand is the experience of feeling connected and content and consistent in your response no matter what is going on around us, no matter who is flipping their lid, or what stress is pressing upon you. You can stand in that place of stress and still feel yourself, not prone to fear or getting flustered because you are rooted to something deeper. Ever have moments

of feeling that way? Ever know somebody who seemed able to maintain their character and calm no matter what is going on around them?

Or on the other hand, there is the experience of feeling dry and burnt out and exhausted. Or perhaps easily tempered and easily panicked or triggered by one thing or another, by the circumstances going on around us. We feel unrooted and blown around and easily frustrated. Ever had days when you felt that way? Ever known others who seem quickly carried along by the winds and forces around one, easily tempered and triggered by circumstances or reminders of past experiences? Now no pointing fingers at your neighbors, especially among spouses; we don't want to cause any domestic disputes. That's not our goal here.

I suspect you can relate to both experiences. You see, the bible, both old and new testaments, draws upon old binaries to make their points at times. The righteous and the wicked is a common trope in the psalms and proverbs, drawing upon the language of the wisdom tradition. But the new testament draws on these binaries also in the language of judgement. Sheep and goats, righteous and wicked, fruit bearing branches and dead branches good only for the fire. But the problem with these categories and getting all finger-pointy with them is that they overlap. For hasn't each of us been like the fruit-bearing tree and the chaff depending on the season, or the day, or the time of day? Sometimes it changes fast. So the focus is not on identifying the righteous or wicked but finding that connection for ourselves.

In the psalm, rootedness and fruitfulness is associated with the person's connection to God's law, God's Torah or instruction. It is tied to one's meditating upon God's word, finding our rootedness, our resources and nutrients in God's word to us. Jesus takes up a similar agricultural image. However, while the tree and its always-green leaves come from that Shepherding arid landscape, Jesus' image of the vine comes closer to the farming and village life of Galilee. And just as shepherding was an old image for a leader or for God's relationship to Israel, the image of a vine was an old image as well, Israel construed as God's vineyard. So, Jesus takes up the image of the vine, but he seems to do so with a similar dual emphasis that Psalm 1 has: the bearing of fruit and the connectedness to the life-source.

While Psalm 1 emphasized the connection with Torah, Jesus takes up the vine image to suggest his place within Israel's history. No longer is Israel as a people or nation the vine or the vineyard, but Jesus is the vine, and one finds their connection to God through Jesus. Jesus becomes The vine, but he is also like a vine. The necessary nutrients and lifeline come through him and are extended to all the branches that maintain that connection.

The connection envisioned here is where the very life one needs flows through that vine; flows through that connection. It is the very source of sustenance and survival, like an umbilical cord. And without it, one does not flourish. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. Apart from the vine we bear no fruit. The image conveys a sense of activity, something happening in and through us when connected to the life source. Guite's poem captures something of that wonder of God's life at work inside us.

How might it feel to be part of the vine?  
 Not just to see the vineyard from afar  
 Or even pluck the clusters, press the wine,  
 But to be grafted in, to feel the stir  
 Of inward sap that rises from our root,

St. Paul speaks of fruitfulness also, drawing upon this same agricultural metaphor. He emphasizes that the spiritual life is not just about getting to where one needs to go, but it is about bearing the fruit of God's love, about becoming a conduit of God's goodness and grace. He speaks of this organic connection through the Holy Spirit – how the spiritual life is more than just doing good things. It is about a deep spiritual and loving connection to God, and like a plant, when the organism is cared for and has what it needs, the fruit naturally comes. And what is the test of the spiritual vine, of that vital spiritual connection? What Paul says in Galatians is that when the vine is connected and nurtured and cared for, the fruit which naturally comes forth is this: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Such fruit is comparable with the tree that is always green. For what comes naturally despite the outward circumstances is determined by its connection to water and nutrients.

To feel a leaf unfold a tender shoot,  
 As tendrils curled unfurl, as branches give  
 A little to the swelling of the grape,  
 In gradual perfection, round and full,  
 To bear within oneself the joy and hope  
 Of God's good vintage,

It is the fruit that flows naturally when connected to the vine. Sounds like a questionnaire one might have to fill out sitting the waiting room of your doctor. Do you have any of these symptoms of being connected to the vine?

Now for any of this talk to matter, one would have to value the fruit just described. Are these the things we value and seek: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? And not only do we have to value these fruits, but we would have to have the humility to acknowledge that we cannot produce these fruit on our own, but only through our connection.

Paul makes a case for the flip-side also, gives his own list of what it might look like when we, like the withering branch, or the chaff being blown about, do not maintain that life-giving link. He says the fruit of that scenario includes things such as: impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, enmities, strife, jealousy, anger, quarrels, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and things like these.

Connection. Not just to get by. Not just for the practical benefits. But, in humility, we must recognize that we must be connected to the divine vine to produce the fruit we desire. For apart from the vine, we will bear no fruit, or rather, not the fruit we want.

I think of the language in the RCA liturgy for Weddings that I have used in the past. It reads:

Christian marriage is a joyful covenanting, and  
 In this covenant they acknowledge  
 that it is the great love God has shown for each of them  
 which enables them to love each other.  
 They affirm that God's gracious presence  
 and abiding power are needed  
 for them to keep their vows,  
 to continue to live in love,  
 and to be faithful servants of Christ in this world.  
 Human commitment is fragile and human love imperfect,  
 but the promise of God is eternal  
 and the love of God can bring our love to perfection.

I think this is true of all our relationships, all our responsibilities. Like a tree in a dry climate, like a vine designed to produce fruit, we must remain connected to the source of life, and love, and joy.

Now, this is the point where metaphor sends us off imagining and wondering but without the practical how-tos figured out for us. How do we stay connected to this vine so that we, as Guite says, may be "grafted in, to feel the stir / Of inward sap

that rises from our root.” How do we stay connected to the vine when that connection is not physical or literal. I mean we walk around and seem to do so independently without being plugged in or anything. But we have just said we must maintain our connection, so what does that look like and how do we do that?

Perhaps some of the time it is a matter of taking a deep breath, of going for a walk where we can pray, or journaling about what is going on in us, or getting back to regular moments of reading and meditating on the scripture, or being with a friend that reminds us we are loved and who reminds us to trust that love more than all the other voices speaking at us.

Sometimes getting back to that connection takes more work and it may require more help and more humility. It may take more work to identify the triggers or patterns that routinely draw us away from our connection to the vine and send us off to some other source seeking relief or a sense of being right. And when we find that what seems to naturally surge through us is not the fruit of the spirit, but strife, self-loathing, enmity, jealousy and anger, and other such undesired fruit, then that is a sign we might still have work to do in us.

You see, the perspective of our scriptures this morning is that faith is not what you do or what you profess, as much as being connected to the source of life. It is about that always-green connection no matter what is going on around us, that we might bear life-giving fruit because we are connected to the source of life and love. It is a natural flow. So our focus is on restoring and nurturing the connection, and the rest might flow naturally from there.

“Abide 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.” Jesus desires that we bear fruit, but before we can do so, we must pay attention to the connection. How is yours?

And all God’s people said...Amen.

*Psalm 1: The Two Ways*

- <sup>1</sup> Happy are those  
    who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
    or take the path that sinners tread,  
    or sit in the seat of scoffers;
- <sup>2</sup> but their delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and on his law they meditate day and night.
- <sup>3</sup> They are like trees  
    planted by streams of water,  
    which yield their fruit in its season,  
    and their leaves do not wither.  
In all that they do, they prosper.
- <sup>4</sup> The wicked are not so,  
    but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- <sup>5</sup> Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
    nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- <sup>6</sup> for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,  
    but the way of the wicked will perish.

***John 15: 1-11****Jesus the True Vine*

**15** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup> He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes<sup>a</sup> to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You have already been cleansed<sup>b</sup> by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide 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. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become<sup>c</sup> my disciples.

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<sup>a</sup> The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing

<sup>b</sup> The same Greek root refers to pruning and cleansing

<sup>c</sup> Or *be*