

Sermon: Pruned by God

(Preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St Giles Presbyterian Church, Ottawa, May 2nd, 2021)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts
be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

I don't think I have what is in me, to be a good gardener. My track record is horrible.

When Daisy and I moved to Toronto in 1998, about two years into our marriage, we bought a cozy little bungalow in the suburb of North York. I was working as a commodity trader, having tasted some success at the Montreal Exchange, I was venturing into the Toronto stock market, trading the TSX index future.

The corner lot property we bought had a decent size backyard, and right at its centre an apple tree. The previous owner kept it in a good shape, bearing much fruit in due season, delicious sweet apples that we could enjoy simply by reaching out with our hands.

I knew I was supposed to trim its branches, to prune it, to keep it from growing too large or too tall, and I may have tried it at the beginning, but I was simply too busy, or too lazy, depending on whom you ask. So the apple tree was left pretty much unattended, unfertilized, uncared for, and unpruned. In a year or two, the apples it bore no longer as sweet. We stopped collecting them and let them simply fall to the ground. At first, my dogs love eating and chewing on those fallen apples, but after a few years, even they wouldn't go near them. When we finally moved out of that property nine years later, the apple tree was a monstrosity — large, tall, menacing and bearing no apples, at least none that anyone would care or dare to eat.

Jesus taught, in the Gospel of John 15:1-2, saying "*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*"

In this metaphor, Christ is the vine, we, the community of faith, are the branches, and God is the gardener who does the cutting and pruning. The purpose of branches is to bear fruit. Those branches failing to do so would be chopped off, removed, withered, and thrown into fire to be burned. Those fruitful branches would still need to be pruned, so to bear more fruit.

I don't know about you, but this metaphor never sits right with me. It depicts God as a taskmaster, inspecting each branch as to its fruitfulness. Axe in

one hand, pruning hook in the other, ready to remove the least useful branch. That ought to bring shivers to anyone hearing such a metaphor.

I very much prefer the other gardener, in another parable also taught by Jesus, in Luke 13:6-9, *“A man had a fig tree growing in his vineyard, and he went to look for fruit on it but did not find any. So he said to the man who took care of the vineyard, ‘For three years now I’ve been coming to look for fruit on this fig tree and haven’t found any. Cut it down! Why should it use up the soil?’ ‘‘Sir,’ the man (that is the gardener) replied, ‘leave it alone for one more year, and I’ll dig around it and fertilize it. If it bears fruit next year, fine! If not, then cut it down.’”*

The necessity to bear fruit is the same, the end result of fruitless branches or fruitless tree is the same, that is being cut down. Yet the difference is that one extra year of tender loving care, of digging around it, and adding manure to fertilize it.

Vineyard is a common metaphor, describing the nation of Israel in the Old Testament, particularly in the writings of prophets. In Isaiah’s parable of the vine, the divine gardener looked for good grapes, yet sadly declared, “it yielded only bad fruit”. (Isaiah 5:2) Jeremiah lamented on the incredible perversity of Israel, saying “Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?” (Jeremiah 2:21). Hosea attributed the rotten fruit of the vine to Israel’s tendency for the worship of idols (Hos. 10:1). Ezekiel explained in 17:5-6 that bad fruit is not the responsibility of the gardener, who took careful pains to plant and take care of the vine

Since Israel is the vineyard that God planted and fruit of that vineyard was not good, therefore God will take these following steps:

*I will remove its hedge, and it shall be devoured;
I will break down its wall, and it shall be trampled down.
I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed,
and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns;
I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it.
For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel,
and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry! (Isaiah 5:5-7, NRSV)*

In other words, God will come in judgment and destroy the vineyard. In such a context of judgement and total destruction, Jesus inserts himself, as the new Israel, and declares: I am the true vine, you are the branches, and God the Father is the gardener. Jesus then invited us, in verse 4, to *“abide in me as I abide in you”*.

One interesting thing about grapevine is that, it is incredibly difficult to tell where the vine ends and where the branches begin. Just under the outer bark of vine and branches are two layers necessary for the survival of the whole plant: the xylem and the phloem.

The basic function of xylem is to transport water and nutrients from roots to stems, to vines, branches and leaves. The basic function of phloem is to carry sugars, product of photosynthesis, downward from the leaves, through the branches, the vine, to the roots. It is a reciprocal arrangement of survival, nourishment, and fruit-bearing.

The branches lift up the leaves towards the sunlight, the vine digs deep into the soil, seeking water source. Only when nourished by both sunlight and water, are the branches then capable to produce fruit — of godly and Christly fruit. It is a mutual exchange, a mutual dependancy. Abide in me as I abide in you.

Perhaps, instead of perceiving the words of Jesus as a threat — that If we didn't bear fruit, we would be cut off from the vine, tossed out and be burned — we should receive them as a promise and an invitation: I am the vine; you are the branches, abide in me and bear fruit. Instead of fretting over the possibility of being chopped down by God the Father, we should rejoice over the invitation of God the Son to 'remain in me and I in you', and turn our attention to bearing much fruit.

In 2010, I attended the Emmaus Project organized by the Presbyterian Church in Canada. It is a church-renewal conference designed to revitalize or reenergize presbyteries, and in turn this would help to inspire congregations to change.

Bill Easum, the keynote speaker of the conference, put to the attendees an interesting and challenging question, "If the Presbyterian Church in Canada should cease to exist, would anyone care? Would God care?" The point that Easum was making, in his brash Texan way, was that churches (and denominations) exist to carry out the mission of God, not the other way around.

There are times, however, when congregations lose that critical sense of mission, turn inward, and exist only to provide fellowship for the 'members of the club'. These churches are effectively spiritually dead — died to the purpose of the New Testament church, of making disciples of Jesus Christ. No amount of congregational renewal or turn-around strategy would work. They must undergo death and a 'second resurrection', to come to life in Christ again.

Easum's thinking and his book "A Second Resurrection: Leading Your Congregation to New Life" had a profound impact on me, on the way I look at what being fruitful means for me as a pastor, and for the community of faith that I

serve. In time, I will share with you what I've learned about St Giles, and what and where I think God is calling us to do and to be.

I am no longer fearful of God the gardener, knowing that Jesus is the true vine, we are the branches, we are interwoven in the life-giving reality of God's vineyard. God is love, and in that perfect love, fear is cast out. As individual, and as the community of faithful and fruitful, we should welcome God's correction, God's discipline and God's pruning. These are in fact part and parcel of God's love for us, the people of God. These are what make us fruitful.

Our responsive psalm today, in Psalm 22:25-31, actually paints us a wonderful picture of the community of faithful and fruitful. I would like to invite you to read this together, as a vision, as an aspiration, and as our prayer to God.

From you comes my praise in the great congregation;
my vows I will pay before those who fear you.
The poor shall eat and be satisfied;
those who seek the Lord shall praise the Lord.
May your hearts live forever!
All the ends of the earth shall remember
and turn to the Lord;
and all the families of the nations
shall worship before you.
For dominion belongs to the Lord,
who rules over the nations.
all who sleep in the earth
shall bow down to the Lord;
all who go down to the dust,
shall bow before the Lord; and I shall live for God.
Posterity shall serve the Lord;
future generations will be told about the Lord,
and proclaim deliverance to a people yet unborn,
saying that God has done it.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**