

A sermon by N. Sellers, preached at First Congo. Branford, CT on 9-4-16

## **"Vineyard Living"**

Selections John 14 & 15, and Habakkuk 3:17-19

This morning's sermon continues with our exploration of vines and vineyards which we began last week, as the concluding focus in our summer-long look at the way God is revealed in the beauty of things found in our natural world. We took notice how this powerful metaphor was repeatedly used to describe the relationship between God and Israel, the chosen people of the promise in Old Testament texts. Focusing on John's texts about Jesus, the True Vine, whose branches are shaped by the care and pruning of God, the keeper of the vines, offered us encouragement and insight into the true relationship between the Vine and its branches. Christians are "abiding" in that Vine, just as branches are connected to the vine and rooted deeply in God's commandments.

But for those of us who are not farmers or workers in agricultural settings, there are some things that get lost in translation: Yes, we know that vines need to be fed and watered and pruned. Yes, we realize that grapes are the result of the flowering and fruiting of the vines, and that fruit only happens on healthy branches. And oh yes, we delight in the fact that grapes are the source of the juice which fermentation transforms into wine...What I also notice about all this metaphorical language is how hard it is to make sense of what daily living in God's vineyard is actually about. What does it mean to "abide" in Jesus, and how does this deepen our faith, equipping us for being "fruitful" - whatever that means - while we're living amongst the other vines of the wider world?

Welcome to the second of our two-part series which I'm calling "Vineyard Living." I'm sure many of you are familiar with the whole slew of lifestyle magazines available by subscription or in the racks of your favorite news stand. There's **Coastal Living** and **Southern Living**, **Country Living** and **Healthy Living**. There are magazines about Simple living, about the Midwest, about almost anything out there you'd like to know more about... Check out the **Practical Winery and Vineyard Journal**, or **American Vineyard Magazine**. You might also enjoy **The Grapevine Magazine** whose mission is, "to bring together buyers and suppliers in the viniculture industry." Suppose you and I could consult a new resource I'm calling **Vineyard Living**, in order to learn more about our relationship with God, the Vine gardener, and Jesus, the True Vine, the mother plant with whom we are to be so closely linked.

A quick look at the Table of Contents just inside the cover of our late summer edition of **Vineyard Living** helps us discover there are sections on "Growth," "Pruning," "Fruit Bearing," and "Harvest." Come along with me, as we explore these practical topics:

In the vineyard of the divine Vine Grower, grows the source plant for all Christian followers, that is, Jesus, the True Vine. And the **growth** of this amazing plant is to be found in the distinguishing features of its branches, that's all Christian believers, disciples who are followers like you and me: Branches display healthy growth as they strengthen their connection with the Vine, a tremendous specimen. The technical term is "abiding" in the Vine which means more than just hanging around or staying in physical contact. To abide is to endure, to persist in dwelling and remaining. This connection of vine to branch and Christ to Christian as John uses it, is the key to

healthy Christian living: It's not a temporary condition, a casual relationship, sort of like take it or leave it when it suits us, something optional or shallow or variable. Rather this connection involves enduring and deepening ties, and an attention to a relationship of love, yes love.

That love of Gardener God for Jesus the Vine, is a love the Vine extends to abiding branches (vv 9-13). The practical guidance of our text is that we dwell in this love as we obey what Jesus asks us to be and to do. "Love one another" is a one command summary of what the Vine requires, appearing on Jesus' lips in v.12 of chapter 15. Growth is linked to faithfulness in love for God and for other believers... If you want robust growth in faith and belief you need to be one who loves your siblings in Christ deeply in Jesus' name. If you long to go deep in production of spiritual fruits, you will cultivate the patience as well as the persistence to keep on loving and forgiving and loving again.

**Pruning** is the next chapter that appears in this exciting edition of *Vineyard Living*, something most people know absolutely nothing about. Pruning does not involve the indiscriminate chopping off of branches found to be annoying or unshapely. It's not about firing up the gas-powered trimmer and shearing whole sections of the plant, in order to get things back in control or for cosmetic reasons. Pruning is about health and well-being. In fact, the word used for "pruning" here also means "cleansed" or "purged." (P. Comfort & W. Hawley *Opening the Gospel of John*, Tyndale, 1994:246) If you've ever learned how to prune you know that there are important reasons to clean up the plant involved: You're looking for deadwood, for injured or damaged branches, for crossing or erratic growth that needs to be redirected. Good pruning involves removing up to a third of the plant's total growth and why? Pruning removes potential disease spots; it opens things up for the penetration of light and the circulation of air. It guides the development of the plant in shape and scale and flowering and fruiting. Pruning is not optional – it's an essential part of growing healthy plants. It's the way God, the Vine Gardener, maintains a productive vineyard full of new shoots growing off the fresh pruning of the branches, and forming fruit.

I think sometimes we have a tendency to believe that the experience of pruning can be universalized to all experiences of struggle or hardship in life. I'm sure you've heard as I have, the broad strokes of explanation, that suffering brings growth or worse, that God makes suffering NECESSARY for growth. In this metaphorical context which highlights an historical experience of suffering as a follower of Jesus, the gospel writer is trying to grapple with that basic question of good and evil: as one commentator puts it, "How could it be that God would allow the faithful to suffer? Answer: it must be willed by God for the benefit of God's people. This is the meaning the writer gives to the experience of rejection suffered by the disciples of that time." It should NOT automatically translate to a universal explanation for all Christian suffering. The meaning we make of difficult situations in the meaning we make at a given time in our own lives, in this Vineyard, with Jesus the True Vine. Suffering is NEVER God's will, and meaning is not causation. Suffering happens. God abides, and so do we, the branches, confident in the love and strength of our True Vine who is Jesus. (E. Askew, *Feasting*, John vol 2:172)

Onward we look into the pages of our remarkable guide about *Vineyard Living*, discovering that growth and pruning all point to the business of **fruit bearing**. Vines

and vine branches are grown in order to produce grapes, and the business of growing grapes is big business! If a branch isn't producing, it's cut away in the pruning process. NOT "production" of our own devices but the gifts of abiding inner life...Not about counting achievements or measuring the fruit I bear as a competition with the fruit you bear. This vine and branch living is a textbook example of interdependence, of the way in which when one part of the vine flourishes we all flourish, just as when there is trouble or challenge, all experience this as well. Jesus' final words about fruitfulness are not a to-do list: Jesus certainly could have said, "Okay, when I'm gone don't forget to talk about me and to the things we did together, like heal, serve the poor, and spread good news!" Jesus' final words here are "Abide." Stay. Remain. Dwell. Endure. Be present and in the verses of the rest of chapter 15, LOVE! (Ibid. L. Armstrong) The counsel of our text is that fruitfulness follows from the interconnectedness of the branches with the vine – that's where our energies lie, within our relationship in the synergy of this Vine we all depend upon.

The last page of our periodical is now to be found as we've finished our late summer reading. A one page editorial summary of this vineyard overview would go something like this...

Listen up vineyard peeps; to live in the True Vine, you are going to have to abide, not because there is nothing else you could be doing, but because dwelling this deeply with me is what's best for your relationship with ME... Fruit-bearing takes a lot of time to develop, and our ability for spiritual growth is in the hands of the Vine-grower, God, who lovingly tends each and every branch... (L. Armstrong, *Feasting*, p. 174)

There is a prayer, written by Dag Hammarskjold, the secretary general of the United Nations who lost his life in a plane crash in September, 1961, which brings so much of our reflecting together: After his death his private journal was published under the title *Markings*. Two months before he died, he wrote this prayerful petition that we might live in God:

Give us a pure heart – that we may see [You].  
A humble heart – that we may hear [You].  
A heart of love – that we may serve [You].  
A heart of faith – that we may live [You].

That's it from the pages of our publication, on ***Vineyard Living***. This is our mandate: abiding has to do with seeing, hearing, and serving God with deeds of love for others. We bear fruit and make a difference in our community because we are grafted into Jesus the True Vine, cared for by the shaping and nurture of Gardener God. Thanks be to God! Amen. (R. Brearley in *Feasting*, p 175)

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