



Jesus' Gardening Tips
John 15:1-8
September 6, 2020

These past few months, Pastor Craig has been preaching from the Old Testament, taking us through the book of Genesis...starting with Abraham up through last week's story on Moses. Now, I love the Old Testament, but I will have to admit (and I told Pastor Craig this), I've missed Jesus. So today we are doing to look at a scripture passage on something Jesus said.

Last week, when Craig preached on Moses and the burning bush, Moses asked God for his name. God said, "I am." In our scripture passage today, Jesus gives an extension to that name, so listen for it in the reading.

Our scripture passage is from the Gospel of John, chapter 15, starting with verse 1. Before I read, let us pray: Stir in us now, Holy Spirit, a willingness to hear, the desire to know the truth and the courage to follow in joyful obedience, that we may be formed by your word into women and men of faith. Amen.

John 15:1-8

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

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Children's Message:

In this passage, we are in a garden. There is the vine (or the stem or the trunk) which is attached to some roots and grows out of the ground. It provides nourishment for the branches and leaves and any fruit. Jesus said, "I am the vine."

There is the branch. The branch is connected to the vine. It cannot survive on its own. It has no root. The only way it can bear fruit is to stay attached to the vine. Jesus said, "You are the branches."

Then you have the gardener. The gardener's job is to coax the best fruit possible from the plants, and sometimes that takes some pruning. Jesus said, "God is the gardener."

Talk about if we stay connected to Jesus, just as these branches on the plant, we will grow strong and healthy in our faith. Ask: How can you stay connected to Jesus? The church helps you. This is why we have children messages. This is why we have Sunday School when the church is open.

Adult message:

I often say to you that when something in the Bible is repeated in a small amount of space, in other words in a few verses, it means "pay attention!" There are two words that are repeated over and over again in our passage: abide and fruit. Fruit is mentioned 5 times in 8 verses. Abide is mentioned eight times. So let's pay attention to them.

So first: what is the fruit?

Unfortunately, the passage doesn't define the fruit. Jesus defined everything else (the gardener, the vine, the branch), but not the fruit. Apparently, Jesus is leaving that up to each of us, to each church. So think of fruit. Fruit is pleasing to the eye, delicious, life-giving.

I went to a conference leadership once, and the teacher talked about becoming a great church. He did not necessarily mean in numbers. He talked the church's fruit. He asked these questions: If your church disappeared tomorrow, would your community notice? Would they care? Would they miss you? A great church would be noticed and missed because they bore much fruit.

Since this pandemic started, people in our neighborhood have been calling, asking for the patio sale people to pick up their furniture, to take their items. This is a fruit; a service we provide for our neighbors. When people move into care facilities, they must downsize. Our patio sale people come into the homes and help families clean it out. Our neighbors can't wait for us to start this "fruit" again.

We have other fruit: we provide financial help for 15 charities in the neighborhood and around the world. Our worship services are fruit to help people draw near to God. How about the exercise classes. We have so many ministries that bear fruit. Our neighborhood is missing our fruit.

The purpose of the branch (which is us) is to bear fruit. Did you notice that the branches had various degrees of fruit. There was the branch that bore no fruit; there was the branch that bore more fruit. There was the branch that bore much fruit, which was the best.

So I present to you Jesus' gardening tips on how to produce much fruit:

Tip #1: One must be pruned in order to produce much fruit.

When I moved into my current house, there was a large bougainvillea bush in the back patio. A landscaper told me to cut it all the way down before the frost came. I was rather stunned. Cut this beautiful bush down? I did, and it grew back beautifully the next summer with lots of fuchsia leaves and flowers.

I also have a Texas ranger. There are several ways to prune it. One way is to take electric or gas powered noisy pruning shears and cut off the tips of the plant to make a nice rounded shape (like they are doing in my neighborhood at 5:30 in the morning). When it blooms, the purple flowers are only on the outside.

However, if the gardener is ruthless, takes the time to go inside the plant and cut away the dead branches, thin it out, and cut the stems different lengths, the whole plant blossoms – inside and out. The pruning made it beautiful.

This is the Gardener's job or God's part. The purpose of the pruning process is to get much fruit from the branches. God goes into our lives and begins the pruning process. God clears away the obstacles in your growth. God removes the things that keep you bearing much fruit. God cuts away what is not helpful for growing.

A tree or plant that has just been pruned doesn't look good. There are going to be seasons in our lives when we feel like a stub. But you need to remember that God is a capable gardener. When you go through the pruning process, (and I wonder if many of us are going through a pruning process right now during this pandemic; I wonder if God's Church is going through a pruning process right now), God is working in your life to produce much fruit; the church is learning how to go out which produces fruit, and which Jesus said, glorifies God.

One more thing about pruning: Verse 2a is rather scary: "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit," and then throws it in the fire. This branch is still connected to Christ, but it is not bearing any fruit. Is this saying that if we do not bear any fruit as a Christian, that Christ will remove us from Himself?

I choose to look at it in a more positive way. The Greek word here for "remove" (airo) has several possible meanings. One is the word "remove." Another meaning is "to lift up."

Let's use a tomato plant as an example: If I planted a tomato plant and did not stake it or put a cage around it, the plant would begin to grow along the ground. The leaves of a tomato plant do not like to touch dirt, especially if it rains and the leaves become muddy. As a result, the tomato plant will not produce much fruit, if any. By placing a cage around the tomato plant or tying it to a stake, I keep the plant lifted up so it gets air and sunlight, and produces beautiful tomatoes.

Verse 2 could read this way: “God lifts up every branch in Christ that bears no fruit.” Keep in mind the context here. Jesus is talking to his disciples just before his crucifixion. He wants to lift them up, encourage them, give them hope because they will be facing a senseless cutting at Jesus’ death.

There are times in your life when you are stuck in the mud, when you are covered with dirt, when you feel cut down, when your spiritual life is a mess, ...God lifts you up, cleans you off (which is another meaning for “pruning”) and puts you in a place where you can produce fruit.

Hallelujah, right? This is good news for those of you who feel like you are being pruned during this pandemic. Your faith won't be quite the same after this. You'll have been pruned and you'll be producing much fruit if you remain or abide in Christ...which is our second gardening tip.

Gardening Tip #2: The branch must abide in the vine.

The first tip (pruning)is the Gardener’s part (God’s part).

The second gardening tip is our part, and it is very important. As I mentioned earlier, the word “abide” occurs eight times in these 8 verses (which means it is very important). The purpose of the branch is to produce fruit; the only way the branch can produce fruit is if it remains connected to the vine or trunk. It receives life from the vine. Remove it, and it has no life on its own

What Jesus is saying that we cannot bear spiritual fruit apart from abiding in Him. We are dependent on Jesus to produce fruit. We cannot do it on our own. I think of the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, self-control. These things are fruit. We do not produce them abundantly unless we abide in Christ. The key is not to achieve for Christ but to abide in Christ, to stay attached...then the fruit will come. It’s an amazing gift.

There is a verse in this section of scripture that many people struggle with. It's a phrase in verse 7 : "ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you." How many times do I hear of people saying they pray, but God doesn't answer their prayer. Why does the Bible say things like this – ask whatever you wish and it will be given to you – and it doesn't work?

The thing is verses like this need to be taken in context. The context here? "If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask...." The context is in abiding. The context is having a relationship with Christ, remaining in that relationship, getting to know Christ and His words deeply....then ask. By that time, you have more the mind of Christ in the asking.

Stay connected to Jesus, my friends. Abide with Christ. If you look up the meaning for abide, you get these words:

Remain in Christ.

Stay in Christ.

Dwell in Christ

Last in Christ.

Endure in Christ.

Continue in Christ.

And the really good news? Christ abides in you.

Jesus remains in you.

Jesus stays in you.

Jesus dwells in you.

Jesus lasts in you.

Jesus endures in you.

Jesus continues in you.

When the fruit is produced, your soul will be satisfied, needs around you will be met because you ask, and God will be glorified.

Amen.