

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the farmer. Every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit, he takes away. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already pruned clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch can’t bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. If a man doesn’t remain in me, he is thrown out as a branch, and is withered; and they gather them, throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, you will ask whatever you desire, and it will be done for you. “In this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit; and so you will be my disciples. Even as the Father has loved me, I also have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love; even as I have kept my Father’s commandments, and remain in his love. I have spoken these things to you, that my joy may remain in you, and that your joy may be made full. “This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. You are my friends, if you do whatever I command you. No longer do I call you servants, for the servant doesn’t know what his lord does. But I have called you friends, for everything that I heard from my Father, I have made known to you.”*

I don't know about you, but I don't remember a lot of details from when I was in grade-school. Maybe because it was so long ago, but maybe because I wasn't that thrilled to be there. At least the comments on my report cards didn't indicate that I was all that engaged. I made good grades but the teachers always wrote things like “wastes time” and “does not follow instructions,” among other things.

One thing I DO remember had to do with the way plants get nourishment from the ground. For a science lesson, the teacher took some white carnations and cut the stems off at the bottom. Then she put them in a clear vase with water and red food coloring. The colored water went up the stems over the next few days and the edges of the petals started to turn red. Of course, that is because the flowers, even though they were cut away from the roots—were using the stems to try and feed themselves. We know that cut flowers can't really stay alive when they are cut away from the roots, but they can stay fresh and healthy looking for a while.

As Jesus told the disciples the story of the vine, they were very aware of what it took to keep a grape vine healthy and producing well. Grapes were a major crop—for the fruit and for the juice or wine. Even if they had never worked in the vineyards, they were well aware of the pruning process and they knew it was important to the health of the vineyard.

I've heard there are people in cities who are so far removed from farms and farming that they have no concept of how fruit and vegetables find their way to the table. I'm not sure it is true but I've also heard that some people don't know that the meat in those wrapped Styrofoam containers and those nuggets in the bags came from real chickens and hogs and cows.

For those folk, this passage might not make sense—but it does for those of us in Beaverdam, where we have gardens and maybe even chickens and cattle and other raw-food products.

Let me read verse 2-5 again: *Every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, he takes away. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. You are already pruned clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I in you. As the branch can't bear fruit by itself, unless it remains in the vine, so neither can you, unless you remain in me. I am the vine. You are the branches. He who remains in me, and I in him, the same bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.*

The year I graduated seminary, we didn't want to move yet, because Tom was going to be a senior in high school—so I took a job running the maintenance side of a landscaping company. One of the apartment complexes we bid on had some horribly overgrown crepe myrtles, so over the winter, I had my crews cut them WAY back—down to about 8 feet or so and re-shape them with a rounded crown. We IMMEDIATELY got a flurry of complaints. Several tenants said, “you've ruined them!” One lady said that we had killed them.

Of course, crepe myrtles only bloom on new growth and the best way to encourage new growth is to cut them way back. I will give the “you killed them” lady some credit—she called us later in the year and said that her crepe myrtles had never been so healthy and had never bloomed so well—and that we were right all along.

Pruning grape vines cuts back on disease and pests and also cuts back on the load on the root system. The best and strongest and most healthy canes are kept and the unproductive ones are taken away. Pruning makes sense—even the pruning of the healthiest vines. Shaping and reshaping and preparing them to be better at their job of producing grapes.

Of course Jesus knew how easily all this translates into the lives of people. As we look at the verses it seems that the non-productive or the dead branches stand for non-believers. In another passage, they are the tares or weeds mixed in with the wheat. They may seem to be a part of the fellowship but haven't been transformed or changed through a relationship with Christ. Those, we are told, will ultimately be removed. They are deadwood. They are not and cannot be productive.

Productive vines are pruned so that they will bear fruit that is more and better and sweeter. We can also see how this analogy works with Christians. God is constantly using our circumstances and his hand to shape us—making us more suited to the work he has for us as individuals and as a group.

Twenty-five or twenty-six years ago, I was doing just fine, thank-you-very-much. I worked as a government employee and I enjoyed what I did and all was good. As a Christian, I was pretty stagnant. Wasn't bearing fruit—at least not much fruit—and God changed my circumstances.

By calling me to ministry, he was forcing me to grow. I didn't really want it. I wasn't looking to be pruned. I didn't like it and I didn't authorize it directly—EXCEPT—I actually did at the beginning of our relationship—when I stood and declared him LORD of my life.

Vonna and I made lots of plans and they were good plans and worthy plans for us and for our little family. But apparently the one in charge of the vineyard had other ideas and he began to prune.

My pruning was also “our” pruning because things changed for all of us. And I'll say that the pruning was not always fun and sometimes it was downright painful to have the dead wood cut away. It was painful to work and go to school. It was painful to live on only one full-time income. It was painful for Vonna to be the main breadwinner. It was no fun to leave family and friends and move to North Carolina for seminary.

And yet in the process and in the pruning came new life. And I don't just mean that Andrea was born. She brought life and vitality and energy—but we also developed new life spiritually. For the first time in years, Vonna and I were dreaming similar dreams and having similar goals and seeing things the same way and we still do, more than ever (if that doesn't scare me, it should certainly scare her).

We were being pruned and there was new growth and new life. In a real sense, we have experienced similar things over the last year. The pruning seems to have been a bit lighter this time, but as we grow we find that there is always room for more and better growth and sweeter fruit.

For believers, God is constantly looking for new ways to help us grow and to progress as his children. I confess that I usually would rather stay where I am than to be pruned and shaped and forced to grow—but that is not what God wants for us. He wants growth. Funny, it doesn't matter if we have been Christians for a year or for eighty years, he still expects growth and for us to bear fruit.

What fruit have we been talking about? I've mentioned wheat and this passage seems to be full grapes—so is that what we are to produce? Grapes and wheat?

If the natural fruit of a stalk of wheat is wheat and the natural fruit of a grape-vine is grapes, what is the natural fruit of a Christian?

Christians.

When an apple tree bears fruit, what is the ultimate purpose? I know the apples feed the birds and animals and even us, but why does an apple tree REALLY bear fruit? So that, over its lifetime it will produce enough apples and seeds that when it is dead and gone there will be more apple trees to take its place and bear more fruit. In the meantime, over the life of the tree, we benefit from the apples—but still the ultimate purpose of the tree and the fruit is to bear more trees and more fruit.

In the third verse, Jesus says that his followers—believers—have already been pruned because they have heard his word. The word of God brings life and it brings understanding and the putting away of unimportant things. The word brings growth and strength and the ability to produce fruit.

Then in the fourth verse, he encourages them (and us) to remain IN him—connected to him and not stray and not seeking to bear fruit on their own power.

We keep trying to put in a garden this Spring. If the rain—AND THE SNOW—ever lets up, we will make that happen. Can you imagine setting out a tomato plant and there it is, standing in the sun and it is full of buds and blooms and little tomatoes. Suddenly a branch of that plant pulls itself from the rest and says, “I don't need the roots and I don't need the stem—I will be my own plant...” And there he is, in the middle—in the hard dry ground and the sun starts to wither him and the rabbits eat away at him and finally the gardener tills up the middle between the healthy plants and the dead little branch is tilled into the ground.

We are to be transformed, not conformed to the world. We cannot be transformed spiritually by ourselves. It takes the power of God to make us grow into something more and better.. We need the power of the Spirit and the Lordship of Jesus. We need to remain connected to the source. THAT is how we grow and bear fruit.

I love God's sense of humor, don't you? You KNOW he has one, right? I don't know about you, but I see a glimpse of it every time I look in the mirror. :)

Remember, he called Abram and Sari—and told them they would bring forth a great nation. Problem was that they were past child-bearing age. Too old to have children. He called Joseph—a snotty spoiled brat to save his people from famine—and in the process pruned Joseph so that he might grow into his spiritual and physical potential. He called an old fugitive shepherd recluse with a speech impediment to lead his people out of Egypt. He chose a scrawny shepherd boy to kill a giant and save the name of his people. He chose Simon—a simple fisherman—who was not educated in the ways of religion and he gave him a nickname—The Rock. When the only time he was REALLY a rock was when he was trying to walk on the water.

And God chose you and me to bring the Gospel into the world. You and I who are too scrawny or too young or too old or too spoiled or too reclusive or too speech-impaired or too much like a rock to do anything important in the Kingdom.

Just like Moses argued—we cannot.

I think I've told you this story recently—but then that is what preachers do (make sure that old stories are told and old jokes never die). ANYWAY, I'm telling it again.

The angels were standing around with Jesus after the ascension. They were looking at the written plans for spreading the Gospel around the world—literally bringing salvation to billions of people. So one of the angels, said, “Jesus let me get this straight. You are depending on those coward fishermen and tax collectors and such to spread the Gospel—on on one—and then for those people to spread it to others and then on and on to those they love and finally win over the world?”

“Yes.”

“But what if that doesn't work? What if it breaks down a hundred years from now or even a couple of thousand years from now? What is the Plan-B?”

“There is no Plan-B.”

If you and I don't remain in the Son, we cannot be transformed and we cannot remain transformed and we cannot bear fruit and if we branches don't bear fruit—no fruit will be borne. Scripture says that the dead and worthless branches will be cut away and cast into the fire.

What then of the rabbits and the deer and the birds? What of the new tree that needs to be rooted from the fruit over time? They are all out of luck.

It seems that we branches have work to do and fruit to bear. Let's begin by tightening our connection to the Son—the Vine who supplies us all we need to bear abundant fruit.

Today you may need that connection to the vine. That is the starting place and maybe you have never come to that place.

Maybe you have that connection but it is weak. Time and circumstances have come between you and the vine. There will never be a better time than now to start reconnecting.

Maybe you need a place to grow and deepen your connection. Zion is a great place for that. Come by statement of faith or profession of faith—making this your church home.