

Mid-Week Sermon - St. John's
John 15:1-8

PATTI

It seems that from the time we're kids, human beings are obsessed with the future. We always seem to be focused on what's ahead. And what's next.

A drivers' license. Graduation. Career. Marriage. Kids. Retirement. In fact, we can be so obsessed with what is next that the moment we are in feels like a waste... a sort of waiting period where nothing seems to be happening.

In the past months I have said and have heard other people say things like...

"We'll get through this." And I wonder, does God see the present time as something simply to "get through"? As if this waiting time were just wasted time?

Another thing I keep hearing people say is, **"I don't feel very productive right now."** For many, the rhythms of life have been so disrupted that they have lost a sense of control, to the point where what's next seems uncertain.

And maybe that's the value of the time we're living in. That God is teaching us to value the present moment.

In John 15, Jesus talks about how God the Father is a gardener, pruning and nurturing the branches of the "True Vine" (Jesus). God is preparing the branches (us) to bear good fruit that flows from our connection to Jesus.

JEFF

What's fascinating to me is that growing a strong, healthy, fruitful grapevine is not a quick or easy process.

New branches are not allowed to produce any fruit until they are *three years old*.

In other words, a new branch gives nothing of value to the gardener at first. No grapes to sell. No wine to drink..

Instead, it takes time and resources and energy without any output for an entire 36 months.

But those three years are critical.
The gardener is preparing the branch for the work ahead.
He's trimming it back, severely in fact.

The branch may even be trimmed back to only a few inches in length. because the gardener is monitoring it - making sure it doesn't get sick or damaged by frost. He is making sure it gets the nutrients it needs to survive.

So a great question may be,
"What is God pruning back or cutting out of your life right now?"
For me I think it's busyness.
Running from one thing to another.

God is teaching me (again) the difference between what is GOOD and what is BEST.
He's teaching me to prioritize by saying "NO" to lesser things so that I can give fuller attention to what's MOST IMPORTANT.

PATTI

Ultimately, his goal is a strong and healthy branch, one that is able to survive the fruit-bearing years ahead.

Under the best care, grape vines can live for hundreds of years, bearing fruit that more than makes up for the three years of nurturing that the branches required.

We are so focused on the NEXT – but we don't what that next could be or when it will happen.

Yet Jesus does. And He reminds us that RIGHT NOW He is forming us into the people we will be and shaping us for the kingdom work he'll call us to do next month and next year and the year after that.

So what God is doing in you NOW is crucial to whatever the NEXT chapter will look like.

JEFF

Then there's also here the sense of what it means to "remain" or "abide" in Jesus.

“If you abide in me”, Jesus says, “you will bear much fruit.”

That word “IF” is pesky, because it’s a condition, right?
IF you stay connected to Jesus... there will be fruit.
But if not... well...

Sometimes I get frustrated because I’m trying really hard
to break a bad habit or
be a more patient person or to
make a difference in the world around me

In other words trying hard to live a holy, God-pleasing life.
But it often feels like the harder I try, the more I seem
to fail and miss the mark.

If that’s ever true for you too,
let me suggest that it’s because
we’ve failed to believe the gospel and
the words of Scripture that we just read.

Jesus said, “without me you can do nothing.”
There’s this dangerous misconception among Christians these days.

Most of us understand (rightly) that there is
nothing we can do to contribute to our own salvation.
Jesus has done it all for us on the cross.

He has forgiven my sins and
put me in a right standing with God.
And that’s true.

But the misconception is that now
living a holy, god-pleasing, fruitful life is all up to me.

That is the lie that Satan wants us to believe.
Because it will lead us to a cycle of
failure and regret and shame every time.

“Without me you can do nothing,” Jesus insisted.
But do people like us really believe that?
That there’s not one shred of goodness or effort or something
that we can contribute to becoming more Christlike?

Religion says, “Do more.” “Try harder.” Measure up.”
Jesus says, “It is finished.” “Remain in me.”

The thrust of this whole text is the importance of having a RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS.

It is as we stay close to Him -
not just in Sunday Worship or morning devotions,
but throughout each day,
that we become, NOT PRODUCTIVE, but **FRUITFUL**.

It is as we stay close to Jesus,
inviting Him into our thoughts and decisions and relationships....

It is as we stay close to Christ,
looking to see where He is at work
around us and then joining Him there
that we become, NOT PRODUCTIVE, but **FRUITFUL**.

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(Story about our neighbors abiding with Jesus and following Him as they first befriended, then took in, and finally adopted a 14 year old boy who was being abused by his foster parents.)

PRODUCTIVE or FRUITFUL?

There is a difference.

Jesus doesn't ask us to produce anything.

That's his job as the vine.

As branches of Christ, our job is simply to **bear fruit**.

To bear the fruit that God brings by his Holy Spirit.

In Galatians 5:22-23 the Apostle Paul says, "But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness and self-control."

I think all of us would say that these are things

we want MORE of in our lives.

But we'll never get them by trying harder.

They are gifts of the Spirit that can only be received when we are still.

Psalms 46:10 says, in the midst of turmoil and uncertainty and upheaval in the world,

"Be still and know that I am God."

That is what it looks like to abide or remain in Jesus.

It's not something you can do on the run.
And it's not instant.

Only when we slow down and sit quietly in the presence of God
that He can do the work in us that He has promised.

And this is exactly what this pandemic
has afforded us the opportunity to do.

To make more time for the Lord.
To discover or rediscover practices
like Bible reading and prayer and journaling that will
nurture our relationship with God.

So what if, instead of aching for the future and resenting the present,
what if we dared to pay attention to what Jesus is doing in us *right now*?

What if we focused on the eternity He is weaving into the present,
strengthening and nurturing us for the days ahead,

What if we took time to enjoy and appreciate His presence?
And take advantage of the opportunities He is creating all around us?

PRAYER:

Father, give us grace today and in the days ahead to “abide in You. Make us rest in your provision and love. Teach us to be still and know you. Fill us each and all with the gifts and power of your spirit. And give us eyes to see where you are at work around us, so that we may join you there, and bear fruit that will last, to your glory and in Jesus’ name. Amen.