



Farmer God

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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John 15:1-8

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As I drive through Northern Virginia, I notice more grapevines than I can ever remem-

ber. When I learned that we were having a vinedresser participate in our children's message, I decided to do some research. I discovered that Northern Virginia is now the fifth largest wine producing region in America. There are now 70 wineries in Northern Virginia alone. Increasingly, I'm asked to officiate at weddings hosted by wineries. People talk with greater frequency about attending wine-tasting events.

I last preached on this John 15 passage some three years ago. I am a novice when it comes to pruning grapevines, but I do know something about pruning trees and bushes. I remarked in this sermon three years ago that the best time to prune is usually in late winter when bushes are dormant before the active growing season begins. Following the sermon, a woman wrote a personal note to thank me for my message. She said she had learned several helpful hints about how and when to prune bushes.

That wasn't really what I had in mind in my sermon. I was simply using pruning as a metaphor to describe God's discipline and correction in our lives.

I entitled this sermon "Farmer God" because Jesus likens God to a vinedresser who prunes us so we can become more fruitful. We'll come back to this matter of God's pruning later in the sermon, but first the story.

As Jesus and his disciples walked the Judean hillside, undoubtedly they passed row after row of grapevines. Grapevines were a common sight in Jesus' day.

Archeological digs in Israel have unearthed numerous winepresses from the first century. Grapes were collected in a large pit where laborers pressed the juice from grapes by walking on them. The juice from the grape flowed into a bottom drain which was funneled into vats that eventually fermented into wine.



Jesus never passed up a teaching opportunity when a natural object lesson presented itself. As Jesus passed by a field of grapevines, he said to his disciples, “I am the vine and my Father is the vinedresser” (15:1). A few verses later, he offers another variation on the theme, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (15:5).

The metaphor is rather straightforward. Jesus is the vine. The Father is the vinedresser. We are its branches.

The key to John 15 is this little word “remain” that is found throughout this passage. It appears 15 times in a span of 11 verses. We read in verse four, “Remain in me, as I remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.” The original King James translates the Greek word for remain, *meno*, as *abide*. “Abide in me as I abide in you” (15:4).

The hymn *Abide with Me* that was written 160 years ago originated from this John 15 passage. The story behind this song is worth something. I wish before we ever sang a song, we would tell its story. There’s a Minute for Witness in virtually every song we sing.

Henry Frances Lyte was the pastor of a church in a small fishing village in Devonshire, England in the mid-19th century. He faithfully served his church for 23 years, until contracting tuberculosis in 1844. He persevered three more years until his health prevented him from continuing. He preached his farewell sermon on September 4, 1847. He had to be helped to the pulpit that morning and could barely speak above a whisper. He urged his people to face death resolutely because of their faith in Christ.

After worship, he rested and took a walk along a beach. He returned home and penned the words to a hymn that was running through his mind. Each verse ended with the refrain, “Abide with Me” from this John 15 text.

Henry died three weeks later. The hymn he had written was sung for the first time at his funeral. How appropriate are the words, “Abide with me, fast falls the eventide; the darkness deepens; Lord, with me, abide! When other helpers fail and comforts flee, Help of the helpless, O abide with me”. The last line is especially poignant: “In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.”

I thought of this hymn in connection with the Summer Olympics commencing this weekend. In the Summer 2012 Olympics in London, a Scottish singer, Emeli Sandi, sang this hymn at the opening ceremonies.



We stay connected to each other through social media. There is simply no lack of ways to stay connected through the internet these days. Here in John 15, Jesus references at least three ways we can stay connected to Jesus.

First, we stay connected to Jesus through prayer. Jesus says in verse 7, “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you.”

Second, we can stay connected to Jesus through Scripture. Jesus’ reference to “my words” in verse 7 underscores the importance of reading the Bible and understanding Jesus’ teaching.

The third way we stay connected to Jesus is in the company of other believers. Every single pronoun in this passage appears in plural form. One way we stay connected to Jesus is through the fellowship of like-minded believers.

For some of you this thought of staying connected to Jesus is a novel idea. You may have never imagined that it is actually possible for you to



connect to God. Consider this sermon your personal invitation to get connected and plug into Jesus.

So what difference does this sermon on getting or staying connected to Jesus make in my life? The goal of this abiding according to Jesus is fruitfulness. Six times in our lesson Jesus talks about bearing fruit for God. Fruitfulness is a common New Testament image to describe the by-product of living for God.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul identifies nine fruits of staying connected to Jesus. The fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22-23).

God prunes us so we will become more fruitful. Jesus said in verse 2 that God as the vinedresser “cuts off every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that doesn’t bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful” (15:2).

Grapevines tend to grow wild unless they are pruned. Most of us amateur gardeners are too timid when it comes to pruning.

Shortly after we moved into our house, I asked a member of our church, an avid rose bush enthusiast, about the sorry state of the rose bushes in our yard. She offered to come and prune them for us. I was horrified when I came home one day to find a pile of live branches cut back from our rose bushes. They looked puny and emaciated after she was done with them. But the next season our rose bushes exploded with new growth.



Grapevines tend to produce new shoots near the base of the vine called “sucker shoots.” These sucker shoots grow large enough to produce leaves but will never mature to produce fruit. As their name suggests, they suck nutrients away from the fruit-producing branches of the vine. If these sucker shoots remain on the vine, they will stunt the growth of healthy branches and produce smaller, inferior grapes.

If fruitfulness is the goal of the Christian life, God must periodically cut back the dead undergrowth from our lives. We don’t relish the thought of God pruning us. Yet, God’s pruning is never vindictive; it’s always redemptive. God prunes us so we will become more fruitful.

You may feel like you are going through a season of pruning right now. Maybe you are facing adversity or challenging circumstances. The author of Hebrews likens it to God's discipline. "God disciplines us for our good," Hebrews tells us (12:10).

"No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on,

however, it yields a bumper crop of righteousness and peace

for those who have been schooled by it" (12:11).



God disciplines
us for our good.

Heb. 12.10

At that fateful Last Supper, Jesus took a cup of wine and announced to his disciples, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood that is poured out for you. Drink of it, all of you" (Matthew 22:27-28). So, why do we use grape juice instead of wine at Holy Communion? I'm so glad you asked that question.

Thomas Bramwell Welch was a pastor in New Jersey until his voice gave out and he turned to dentistry. As a devout Methodist, he was staunchly opposed to alcoholic beverages. While he tolerated wine at communion, he was looking for a suitable substitute. After a church member showed up at his home after consuming too much communion wine, he kicked it into high gear. He applied Louis Pasteur's new process of pasteurizing milk to grapes in 1869. The result was unfermented wine, better known as grape juice. His proposal to substitute unfermented grape juice for wine at communion was met with resistance by church leaders. It wasn't until his son began to market Welch's Grape Juice during the temperance movement that the idea began to take hold. In the 1920s, when prohibition outlawed alcoholic beverages, churches switched from wine to grape juice at communion. Some churches never switched back.

Jesus spoke of this cup as “the fruit of the vine” in Luke’s gospel (22:18). I accept, at face value, this fruit of the vine imagery. I don’t much care if we remember this sacrament with fermented or unfermented wine. The principal reason we use grape juice today is to make the sacrament accessible for people in recovery programs.

As we come to Holy Communion today, we remember Jesus’ words, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” This abiding is reciprocal so long as we remember that we are able to abide with Jesus because he abides with us.

Jesus wants us to grow. He loves us, yet refuses to coddle us. That’s why he prunes us so we can bear fruit for God. “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

