

Preaching from St. Stephen's Pulpit

St. Stephen Lutheran Church, Williamsburg, VA

April 28, 2024

Messy Vines

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Beloved by God, my siblings in Christ; grace to you and peace from God our Creator and our Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Here's some advice about grapevines that I found online, "If left to its own devices, a grapevine will grow into a thick, messy bush of leaves and branches, so human intervention is needed to keep things in check, and to encourage the vine to produce fruit."¹ Growing grapes has been a part of humanity's repertoire for some time now. Archaeological data suggests that domestication of the grapevine began 6,000–8,000 years ago.² So for roughly 8000 years humanity has been battling the grapevine's natural desire to intertwine and interconnect. The problem with this natural inclination though, is that such messiness negatively impacts the overall health of the entire plant.

Humans have been pruning and cutting off unproductive branches from grapevines for some time now, but God has been battling humanity's natural messiness for far longer! The need for pruning arises from a vine's tendency to take nutrients from the source, the overall vine, but not use them for their intended purpose, thus producing no grapes...the main point of the vine's existence. Without pruning the grapevine is less able to produce fruit, less able to do what it was created to do...less righteous.

It's not just the hoarding of resources though, that can come from the grapevines natural inclinations. I've dealt with wild grapes before, and one of the odd things I've seen amongst them is one branch spreading over another, sometimes wrapping around the fruit of the other branch, impeding its growth. This could almost seem to be an overdependence of some sort or a weird sort of competition for resources. The messiness of the grapevine, when left to its own devices, leads to all sorts of different harms to the plant...and even over-connectedness can be harmful.

This is a powerful analogy for human community too. We are created to be in relationship, created to be connected in community with others. We are social

¹ *The lifecycle of a grapevine*. (2020, August 19). Cult Wines.

<https://www.wineinvestment.com/us/learn/magazine/2020/08/the-lifecycle-of-a-grapevine/>

² Zohary D., Hopf M. (1993). *Domestication of plants in the old world* (Oxford, England: Clarendon Press;), 143–150.

creatures. But there is a balance to this. An acknowledgement both of the uniqueness and value of each individual, along with a celebration of life and identity formed by the web of connections we share with others. Ubuntu! “I am because we are!” But the messiness of isolation or the messiness of over-connectedness or competition are just as harmful to humans as the messiness of the grapevine gone wild.

Such actions at work in us and through us need pruning. We have those thoughts and inclinations within us that lead to messiness, but how do we respond to them is what matters. Do we reach out in competition or overreliance towards others? Do we selfishly draw back and away from others? Hoarding or trying to keep what is freely given to us exclusively for ourselves? Do we act out of this brokenness or do we allow ourselves to be pruned? Use the teachings of Christ to compassionately see our brokenness and lovingly forgive it...pruning it back so fruit can grow. Noticing those patterns and behaviors and in noticing them, begin to gently try and change them. Setting aside childish and selfish ways and grounding ourselves in God’s values, seeking God’s Kingdom, walking Christ’s Way.

What about the healthy branches? What do they look like? How do they do it? How do those branches find this balance? I think Jesus answers that for us when he briefly steps out of the analogy of the grapevine to say, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”³ Abide in Christ, and thereby abide in God. Ground your very self in the divine. And understand that the divine is already in you.

In a very counter-cultural way, the healthy branches do nothing! Instead, they simply are. They are connected to the greater vine and that connection, and the knowledge of that connectedness is all that seems necessary. The branch takes in what it needs from the vine, no more, no less. The branch knows it is connected to a great vine and yet maintains its own uniqueness. The branch knows of other branches connected to the same vine and lives in harmony with them, not competing against them or becoming unhealthily dependent on them. And out of that...existence...the healthy branches bear fruit.

We produce the best fruits when we get out of the Holy Spirit’s way. We produce an abundant harvest when we merely share with the world what we have already received from God. We receive from the divine source of life and love, we rest in that gracious abundance, and naturally we then bear the fruit we were created to bear. Very little is required of us, nothing but an awareness of the divine connection steering us towards others; steering us along the Way.

³ John 15:4a (NRSVue)

And what fruit does Christ expect to grow from the branches abiding in him? The same fruit he bears to the world...grace, healing, justice, peace, mercy, compassion, but most of all...love. Love is the fruit we are created to bear. Love as John wrote to the church...because God first loved us! Love as the Holy Spirit teaches us to love, without regard for difference or division as Philip loved the Ethiopian eunuch. Love as Christ loved...prodigally...sacrificially.

Abide in God's love and you cannot help but love others. Abide in God's love and you can love your self as God loves you. Abide...dwell...reside...shelter in...live. What a beautiful word to ground community on. What a powerful word to build mission on. What a difficult word to live out!

How do you abide in God's love? How do you resist the temptation to do things on your own or the temptation to turn our fruit production into a competition? How do we learn to trust in God's action in us and through us? How do we let go of our need to control what God is up to? I don't have a great answer for these questions...I struggle with them myself plenty! But Christ gives us the starting point...abide.

The mystic Mechthild of Magdeburg (~1207-1282 CE) wrote about her experience of God's abiding love. She records this experience as a dialogue between her soul and God: "The soul begins:

Ah, Lord, love me passionately, love me often, love me long. For the more continuously You love me, the purer I will be; the more fervently You love me, the more beautiful I will be; the longer You love me, the holier I will become here on earth.

God responds:

Because I Myself am Love, I will love you continuously.
Because I long to be loved passionately, My desire is to love you fervently.
Because I am everlasting and eternal, I will love you long....
When I shine, you will reflect my radiance,
When I flow, you will flow swiftly,
When you breathe, you draw into yourself My Divine Heart.
When you cry for Me, I take you into My arms.
When you love Me, we are united as one.
Nothing can separate us, for we abide together joyfully."⁴

⁴ Mechthild, *The Flowing Light of the Godhead*, in *Meditations from Mechthild of Magdeburg*, ed. Henry L. Carrigan Jr. (Brewster, MA: Paraclete Press, 1999).

This is the powerful promise of God...nothing can separate us, for we abide together. We abide together with God, and when we abide in God, we abide together with one another and creation too. And in that abiding love we will be whole, and our joy will be complete! Every breath you inhale is an opportunity to recognize God's abiding in you. Every breath you exhale is a chance to share out the divine love in your deepest core with others. Abide and bear fruit. Be loved and be loving. Amen.