

1 JOHN 4:7-21

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

JOHN 15:1-8

¹"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.

SERMON

A few months back I was reading some article in the New York Times about trends in parenting or something like that. Honestly, I don't remember much about the actual content of the piece. But what I do remember, very clearly, is the opening story the journalist told. She was reminiscing about a day she spent in the park with her young daughter. There were other parents around, and the adults got into a conversation about the traits and characteristics they'd like to see in their children as they grew up. One dad asked, "what's the most important marker, for you as a parent, to see that your child has grown up to be a successful adult?" And it's a good question, I think, because it tells us something important about what we value at our core. It's not just about raising children, it's a question we really can ask far more broadly: what is the marker, for you, of being a successful person?

Now, all of the parents gave thoughtful, well reasoned, and social acceptable answers. One mom wanted to see her children achieve a high level of education, because for her that would mean they would get good jobs and contribute meaningfully to society. Another parent said that they'd love to see their kid grow up and become gainfully employed in a job that paid enough for them to live. It wasn't about greed or extravagance, simply about that basic need we all have to work, make a living, and provide. One dad valued a quick wit and a sense of humor. One mom wanted her daughter to be well respected. The author of the article said that she would like for her children to be kind. That, for her, kindness toward others was her greatest measure of human success.

For me, I think as I grew up I thought intelligence and competence would be the most significant measures of success in my own life. However, now I think that what I want most for myself and for my kids, in addition to having jobs and being kind and all of that, is to be emotionally astute individuals. There's something about understanding the feelings of others, being able to empathize, the gracious ability to give the benefit of the doubt. I can't quite put my finger on why, but that feels like a very lofty and significant bar for measuring my life, or the lives of my children.

No matter what we value most, as parents, as individuals, as workers or bosses, friends or church members, those values will, in fact, drive how we think, how we behave, and how we grow. Our values, in the best sense, can and should shape our priorities. So, in our family, we spend a lot of time asking questions about how certain situations made us feel, and then we imagine together how it might have made other people feel. I'm trying to build up that empathy muscle in myself and in my kids, and it comes out in the way I parent and the way I live.

And this brings me to grape vines. Really, there are a lot of plant examples we could use here, but grape vines work for me because I grew up near vineyards, and it's in the Bible today, so we're going to go with that. There are grape vineyards in this area, so I'm assuming that you all have at least seen them out the window of a car at some point in time, if you haven't actually had the chance to see a grape vine up close. Grapes, obviously, grow on a vine. And they grow from a big, fat, woody stem that sends out smaller branches and suckers. In a vineyard, grapes are run along a trellis system, so that the vines have something to wrap themselves around, and so that

when the fruit ripens, it doesn't topple over into the dirt, but is instead supported.

Now, the trick with grape vines is that every year, they send out more and more tiny little vines from that big, thick, root, but the old ones keep growing, as well. So, left unattended, after a few years, one root will be feeding a whole system of little vines shooting off in all sorts of directions. And it turns out, that's a really ineffective way to grow grapes. Because all of the energy being sent up through that root is dividing into a hundred little vines, each of which will produce, maybe, a bunch of grapes. So, what vinedressers do is they go out into their vineyards each year, and they cut off the branches of each plant that are least productive. This is called pruning, right? Most of you know what this looks like in your own gardens. By pruning back parts of the vine, they're allowing that root to put all of its energy and nutrients into growing grapes from the most successful branches, and consequently, the vineyard will get a much larger harvest. The energy is directed toward the best parts, the highest producers, and the rewards are noticeable.

And what happens to those pruned branches? Well, they're stuffed in giant paper sacks and set out on the curb to find their way to the great compost heap in the sky. They're useless, dead, unproductive.

And it doesn't take a master gardener to make the connection between this and the text for today, largely because the text is all about grape vines. God is portrayed as the vinedresser, moving through the field, pruning back those branches that are unproductive, allowing all the energy of the root to be channeled into the branches that are most life-bearing. And the branches that

are pruned away, they get cast out and burned, the sort of first century equivalent of the compost pile.

This is a rich image, we could talk about what it means for that root to be planted in the ground, to be planted in God, gathering our strength and energy from the source that is Jesus. Or we could talk about what it looks like to bear good fruit as a follower of Jesus. But today I was struck by this image of pruning and burning. What does that mean?

Often we make a big mistake when we read this passage. We think about it as good plants and bad plants. We want to be the good plants, right? I'll bear good grapes, I love Jesus enough, and so I won't be pruned away. But him, over there? Yes. That guy. He's a bad plant. He doesn't love Jesus the way I do, so he's going to get cut off and thrown into the fire. It's all about being one or the other. Good or bad. Fruitful or burned. But I think that's the wrong way to read this passage.

Because when you think about it, a grape vine is, in total, one plant. That one plant has both very fruitful branches, and it also has branches that produce less. That one plant will have both branches that are pruned and cut away, and branches that remain to bear grapes. So, I wonder, what might it look like for us to read this little parable as really a story about how each one of us is like that plant. Each one of us has both good, life-bearing, fruitful branches, and we also have those branches that just aren't cutting it. What would it look like for us to see God as a great vinedresser who is actively at work in each one of us, pruning back the parts of ourselves that just aren't giving us life or bearing good fruit for the kingdom, cutting

them off and throwing them out, so that we have more energy and more resources to put toward those parts of ourselves that are our best parts.

That article from the New York Times, it brought into focus for me the idea that parenting is, in many ways, an act of constantly pruning. With children, we're always making choices about how we speak to one another, what activities we participate in, what value we place on school or sports or music or art or whatever. Those choices we make as parents or teachers, they have the effect of pruning and shaping the way our children grow, the places where they learn to put their energy and attention.

And the same takes place in all of us as adults. We are constantly making choices for one thing over another, shaping where we put our energy. A good manager in an office will do this work with their employees. There's tons of data to back up the idea that your office will run more smoothly if you encourage your people to put more energy into the things they're really, really good at and then back them up with support and ask others to pick up some of the roles that maybe aren't a particular employee's forte. That's an act of pruning: put your energy toward the best branches, cut off the dead weight.

As Christians, for all of us, this comes down to a constant conversation about what we consider our best. What grapes in our own lives display the compassion and love of Jesus? What branches of ourselves promote peace and grace in this world we live in? What parts of our vine bear out those fruits of the Spirit of God? Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, Kindness, Goodness, Faithfulness, Gentleness, and

Self Control? And then, the equally important question to ask: which of our branches are not yielding the kind of good fruit we want to see? Not that they're necessarily yielding something bad, I mean, it's still a grape vine, it's not like some of the branches are bearing poison berries or anything like that. But, it's important to look at those areas that take our energy, but don't give anything fruitful in return. And then, when we see them, what does it mean to allow God to cut them away? To stop putting our mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual energy into the branches that do not give life to us or to this world?

For me, one area I've experienced and worked at this pruning is my outlook on life in general. Naturally, I find that I tend to have a bit of cynicism in the way I view the world. And while that's not necessarily bad, it also isn't particularly kind or generous. I don't think that's my best self. So, what I've started to do is work on that emotional empathy bit I mentioned before. When I find myself reacting sarcastically and cynically, I try to take a step back, imagine the situation from another perspective, and think about what other people might be seeing. I take my energy away from the cynical branches and put it toward the empathetic, compassionate vines, and in the end, I often do see the world a bit more positively, with a little less judgment. It feels a bit more loving and gentle, a little less cynical. In those moments, my energy goes toward bearing good fruit.

Pruning isn't an easy task, there is, in a real way, pain inherent in the very idea of cutting off a branch. But, it's also one of those tasks where the maxim "the harder decision is the easier decision" proves true. Doing the hard work earlier, pruning back the branches of our

lives, in the long run, it allows us to put our energy into growing more into the people God created us to be, which is freeing and ultimately a much easier, happier, and more fruitful way to live...both for ourselves and for this world God has put us in.

This week, I would invite us to dwell in the question of what it means to be the grapevines of God, what it means to bear good fruit in due season, knowing that the hard and painful work of pruning is a necessary and significant part of becoming the vines, the people, the community God has created us to be.