

St. Paul's Congregational Church,  
April 29, 2018, Easter 5B  
John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21  
"Bearing Fruit"  
Rev. Cynthia F. Reynolds

Let us pray: may the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One year my mother made my father a cross stitch sampler that read, "Who plants a seed beneath the sod cannot help but believe in God." We had a huge garden at home – I grew up enjoying among other things, sweet corn - imagine starting the water boiling, going to the garden, picking ears of corn, shucking them on the way back to the kitchen, cooking them, and then enjoying eating that corn so fresh, minutes from harvest. That certainly spoiled me – no supermarket corn tastes as good as that corn did. And eating carrots fresh out of the garden – we'd wipe the dirt off on our clothes and eat them right there – the best! So it's no wonder that I respond to these images Jesus uses of the faithful life being like that of a garden. And it's no wonder that my soul is restored in my own garden today. In her little book, "Listening to the Garden Grow", Betty Sue Easton says it so well: "I believe that if we have faith that God creates all things, we are ultimately brought into harmony with the Creator's Will. One reason I so enjoy having a garden, she writes, is that I can watch God's miracles at work daily. And by taking these miracles to a higher level, I can believe God works miracles in me and in my life, as well. Working in the garden allows us to give thanks to the Creator for all the blessings of life – but being in the garden is far more than an experience of work; in many ways, it is an experience of worship."

So this passage from the gospel of John touches me deeply - I find so many lessons for living a life of discipleship here – and even though we live in the metro New York area and our lives are very different from the people to whom Jesus was speaking, there are basic and profound truths here for all of us, no matter whether we grow African violets or flowers outside or vegetables to enjoy. No matter what, we need to nurture and maintain our connection to the vine, remembering that Jesus is the vine, God the gardener.

There's a story about a gardener – one year he'd been very careful to select the best cucumber seeds. He planted each of them at their proper depth, fertilized and watered the small plants faithfully. He worked the soil to prevent weeds from

encroaching and he sprayed to keep the bugs and blights from hurting the young plants.

It seemed to be a wonderful season for cucumbers – just the right amount of rain and sunshine. He watched as the broad green leaves grew and then was happy to see that blossoms appeared on the vines.

But then one day he noticed that here and there some of the leaves were dying; blooms were fading. Most of the leaves remained a healthy glossy green, but amid them were those turning brown. Why, he wondered, would some die in the midst of all the living? What's wrong here? He looked closer.

Stepping carefully among the tangled mass of vines he traced the ones on which the leaves and blooms were dying and found that they were all connected to a single stem. There, just above the ground, cut-worms had severed the stalk. The entire vine above that point was dying because it was no longer attached to the roots and to the stem that had produced it.

Now, isn't that a good image for us as we make our faith journey both as individuals and together. We need to be reminded of our connectedness to God: that we are incapable of bearing fruit when we are not attached to the vine, when we are not connected to the roots which nourish us and help us grow our lives more fully into a life of disciple. God is the gardener. Jesus is the vine.

We can so easily be distracted by our to-do lists, by our routines. When things are going well we can get caught up in all kinds of "stuff", in the day-to-day – we don't think about the need for grounding ourselves. At some point, though, we eventually get overwhelmed – we have such trouble balancing work and family and all our responsibilities. When we try to go to sleep our minds won't shut down. We worry. We replay events of the days – even events of a distant past over and over again in our minds. Could it be that somehow, slowly, we've come to think everything depends on us? We resist outside help. We neglect the power source of our very lives. We lose our grounding, our connectedness to the vine – and furthermore, we forget that we need to trim, prune our lives a bit so we can grow, reconnect with our very source of life and love. We need to make room to grow.

As I reflected on this, I remembered that since I really like fresh beets, last year I decided I'd plant some in my garden – I read the instructions on the seed packet telling me to thin them out when the plants were about 2-3 inches tall. Well, I couldn't bring myself to do the ruthless thinning needed for a good crop of beets. And you know what, not one of those beets grew to a size for eating. There

just wasn't room for them to develop, to expand, to become the best they could be, what they were meant to be. Maybe that's a warning for us too - are we involved in too many things so that we don't know the joy of becoming the best that we can be? Does our daily routine distract us? Do we have room to grow?

When I get overwhelmed by my own busyness, my own worries, my own frustrations and fears, the only thing I can do is pray, "I can't do this God - you have to." I have to stop and connect, reconnect to that incredibly strong vine and ground myself in God's presence - and God has never let me down. When we can truly confess that God is in charge, not us, it's so liberating! Seems contradictory, doesn't it. But it isn't. When we move aside and let God be God and let ourselves be God's children - when we are deeply connected to the source of all life, we can grow to be the best we can be, and experience what God wants for us. And that's life that's full and rich and joyful, no matter the circumstances on any given day.

It would be easy to skip over the harder parts of this passage - but we can and must face them - knowing we're supported and nurtured by that awesome good news. The hard part is this: branches that bear no fruit are cut off. And even the branches that do bear fruit are pruned to be even more fruitful.

So, if we're the branches, do we allow ourselves to be shaped, trained, sometimes pruned or thinned, sometimes stretched to a new position? These decisions make all the difference in the amount of fruit we have to share. We know, though, that the pruning process can be painful.

I have a forsythia bush in my back yard - how I love that brilliant yellow color in the spring - makes the gloomiest, drizzly, rainy day look beautiful and bright - but last year it didn't bloom so well - it got very leggy and just not pretty. So after it bloomed, I did what the gardening books told me to do and really cut it back. It looked so sad - and my neighbor commented on how small it looked. It really did - and I wondered what this year would bring. Well, it's on its way back - it's growing again, even on the branches where it looked like they were dead - and now is regaining its bushy look - with healthy leaves on it - ready to bloom again next spring. That cutting back really hurt. But I learned, as have many of you, that the pruning was essential to the health of the plant and that the pain was more than worth it.

Pruning is essential to growing, to productive lives, to bearing flowers or fruit. But we sure don't like it much when we experience a "pruning" in our own lives. We sure don't like it much when we don't get what we want. But maybe that's not what God wants for us - our discipleship means getting what God wants. And sometimes, what God wants in and for our world, for ourselves as individuals,

cannot be achieved without cost and sometimes that cost is painful – at least in the short term. But, if we're attached to, if we're part of the vine, we're nurtured by the vine – and that's a wonderful thing.

There was a woman who thought she was going to complete college and go on to law school. That was her dream from childhood. But she felt called during her senior year of college to go into elementary teaching. While she was doing volunteer tutoring, she discovered that she had real gifts for teaching children.

After her first 10 years of teaching she said, "You know, when I decided against a more lucrative career and went into teaching, I thought of all the things I was having to give up – mainly things associated with money. It was a sacrifice. It was painful, like almost any sacrifice. But after a decade of teaching, I realize that the cost was worth it, the pain was worth it. I have a good life. Not the life I thought I wanted, but the life I now know that I needed. The life I know God was calling me to."

What is the life to which God calls you? What is the life to which God calls this congregation? What needs to be thinned out, pruned so we might produce the fruit, the ministry that God is calling forth from us?

Maybe this ministry isn't what we think we should do – but instead it's the ministry that God wants you, me, us as church to do!

There was a woman who was asked to help with the ministry in her church preparing meals for the homeless persons nearby. She showed up every week, worked hard in the church kitchen, and hated every minute of it. She began to resent the recipients of her good work, peeved at the lack of gratitude among some of the people who she served. One day, she complained to her pastor about it – and the pastor surprised her by telling her, "If you don't enjoy a particular ministry, then stop. Learn to trust your feelings – maybe God is telling you that you aren't cut out for this sort of work." Sometimes we have to let go of some activity in order to better focus ourselves, in order to better utilize the special gifts that God has given to each one of us in order to be more fruitful.

And the same is true for churches: there were two churches – Pleasant Grove and Pleasant Hill. Both of these churches had about 40 members, mostly older.

Pleasant Hill church decided it really wanted to grow, to get back in touch with its neighborhood. So the older women of the church started running an after school program for the children in the community. This program attracted many

children – they were not only cared for after school, but they were also invited to church. And the children came – with their parents. Today that church has about 75 active members, an amazing growth in less than a year.

On the other hand, Pleasant Grove didn't really want to reach out to their neighborhood. The community had changed – people of a different culture had moved in. And, if by chance, one of them visited at Pleasant Grove, they got the distinct impression that they were not welcome there. Well, the Pleasant Grove church finally closed due to lack of viability.

Isn't this an example of pruning? God sometimes comes to us with clippers in hand – that which is dead and unproductive must be pruned away, cut back, so that new life and new growth can come forth. Painful? It sure can be. But necessary.

What do we need to trim from our lives, from our life together as church, in order to bear the fruit God intends for us? And then, how do we reconnect or stay connected to the vine, trusting God's promises that can always be counted on. When we have the heart and the will – God does the rest through us.

Listen to these words again: I am the vine. You are the branches. If anyone remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.

Just go outside after this worship and look around at the trees and plants that are in the cycle of growth once again. God is a great gardener! And what God plants is tremendously fertile, tremendously productive. God has planted the vine called Christ in our midst and when we are willing, we are grafted onto that vine and we receive all we need for growth.

All we have to do is remain a part of that vine and produce more fruit – maybe even a different kind of fruit than we've ever grown before – more fruit than we believe we can – fruit that is pleasing to God – seems too simple, doesn't it. But it is simple. Receive and live in the joy God intends for each of us. Praise be to God, the master Gardner – our strength and our hope. Amen.

Let us pray:

Nourishing God, wellspring of life, you give us everything we need to sustain our lives. But we cannot live as you desire unless you give us even more, the power of your love. Graft us into Christ and let into our barren existence the surging power of your Holy Spirit. Make us into green, growing, and loving

branches. Cluster the fruits of our labors in Christ and press them into a love that flows into all the world. We pray in the name of Christ, the vine. Amen.