

## FRUITFULNESS IN GOD'S KINGDOM

John 15:1-8 — April 28, 2024

In my sermon two weeks ago I pointed out that Eastertide is a season of preparation. We Christians spend a lot of time in preparation—preparing for a significant moment. In Advent we are preparing to welcome the Word-become-flesh—the Incarnation. In Lent we are preparing to meet the Word-alive-forever—the Resurrection. In this season of Easter we are preparing to receive the sending of the Holy Spirit. In each seasons it is a personal preparation, But also a communal preparation. So what we are about these days is preparing for ministry in the power of the Holy Spirit—that we celebrate on Pentecost in another three weeks. After that celebration we begin the long season of Pentecost—often referred to as the ordinary season. We will be done with preparation, until we start it all over again in Advent. So let's look at how we're doing in this preparation, preparing for ministry.

Jesus came to earth to tell us who God is and to show us how we are called to live in God's kingdom. He used parables of the kingdom like the sower, the mustard seed, and the leaven. He used parables of grace like the Good Samaritan and the Prodigal Son. I think the narrative which we read in the gospel lesson today is the most poignant way to describe the preparation for ministry, which is exactly what we need to hear. The three words which I will use to describe our preparation for ministry as exemplified in our narrative today are: relationship, community, and fruitfulness.

Let's think about relationship. We know well the verse, "I am the vine, you are the branches." (15:5) But before that he talks about the relationship of the vine with the vinegrower, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower." (15:1) It is in this relationship of Jesus with his Father that John uses the phrases, "prune", "bear fruit", "abide in me". For John, Jesus always links his relationship with the disciples then and now to the relationship with his Father. But neither of these relationships is just the relationship per se. It is a relationship for a purpose. This is so important. And the purpose, of course, is to do ministry in his name.

Don't get caught in the trap of what pruning means. I know lots of sermons will be preached today about what we need to have pruned in our lives. That's not all bad. Ask yourself that question, if you like. But I submit to you that the real point made here is the relationship between the branch and the vinegrower. Listen carefully: "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. [The word for "prune" can also be translated "clean" or "to be cleansed". Now listen carefully, the text goes on to say: "You are already pruned—[already been]—cleansed by the word I have spoken to you." (15:3) Now we get to the familiar verse, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit (15:5)—"Abide in me"—rest in me, hang around with me—relationship talk, to be sure. That, of course, is our relationship with Jesus.

Let's look at community. The imagery here is so important: one, true vine, but many branches. What better imagery could there be? I see here the notions of interrelationship, mutuality, and interdependence. There is beauty in many branches; there is support in many branches; there is functionality in many branches. We're talking here of our relationship with one another to do ministry.

Which brings me to my third word from this text. Without this there is no reason for relationship or community. And this word is fruitfulness. Maybe not as many times as the phrase “abide in me”, nonetheless, we read “bear fruit” five times in these eight verses. Production is the reason for being. The vine through its many branches creates the ability to produce fruit. And, as anyone in the business of production knows, the more quality product you produce the better. And the product does not appear out of nothing. It is the result of the work of the designer / creator. I am a fiber artist. I know that the more effort I put into harvesting quality fiber, and fabricating to the best of my ability, the better that product will be.

I like this short paragraph by Meda Stamper in a commentary on this text written for Working Preacher:

“We bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the gardener-God who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into the unity of the Father and the Son. God’s love, presence, and pruning are gifts. But we also choose the abiding place of our soul. If we want to bear Jesus’ fruit, then we choose to abide in him, which we will learn in the very next sentence in John’s narrative means to “abide in my love”. (15:9)

Yes, the rest of the verses in the fifteenth chapter of John include a beautiful discussion of God’s love and the invitation for us to share God’s love. But that is the text for next week, which Sister Nancy will share with you. Suffice it to say here, Jesus says “I am giving you these commandments that you may love one another.” (15:17)

So this is the Good News today: God, the gardener, shows who he is by our bearing much fruit as we mature as his disciples.

So the gospel text calls us into relationship in community for the purpose of fruitfulness. Let us get on with the work of “bearing much fruit.”