

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: John 15:1-8

Sermon Title: "Necessary Cutbacks and Abundant Surplus" (Trekking through the Gospel of John)

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

August 21, 2011

I used to join a group of pastors and parishioners who would meet once every month, and we would gather together to discuss books we were reading that covered various topics. We might talk about ministry and spirituality. We might talk about leadership and spirituality. Church growth and spirituality. Worship and spirituality. Whatever the topic was, we made sure the books had something to say about spirituality. We had a name for our group: The Vineyard Guild. The term *guild* makes us think of how young men would become apprentices to some craftsmen such as blacksmiths or carpenters, and those craftsmen would teach their apprentices everything they knew. The apprentices would become stronger and more knowledgeable, until one day they would be craftsmen with their own apprentices. The craft itself would live on.

We called ourselves a guild, because we were learning from one another, growing in our faith in Jesus Christ. But we called ourselves *The Vineyard*

Guild, because we understood that the true Craftsman is Jesus Christ. We learn from him what it means to be a disciple.

Throughout our times together as The Vineyard Guild, we couldn't help but fall back on the brilliant illustration that Jesus describes in John 15. Remember: Jesus is having his last supper with his disciples. He has many last things to tell them before they head off to the Garden of Gethsemane, and before Judas Iscariot comes back with a small army of soldier to arrest Jesus. Jesus knows how to tell a parable. He knows how to paint the picture, so we can see it vividly in our mind's eye. A vine grows out of the ground, and it divides into separate branches that reach for the sun. Those branches produce small green leaves to absorb the sunlight. They also produce small orbs of fruit, which don't look like much at first; but if we give them time they swell up with juice. They may turn a rich color of green or purple. And then they are ready to be harvested, and eaten, and enjoyed.

Jesus can paint such a picture for the disciples, because they saw vineyards all around them. We might not remember the last time we saw a vineyard, let alone one grape vine coming out of the ground. But

we can look out this window and see trees. They have sturdy trunks that rise up from the soil. They produce boughs and branches and leaves. Some trees produce fruit that taste wonderful, when they are ready to be plucked: apples, peaches, oranges.

We can look at a tree, picture it vividly in our minds, and then we can imagine a smaller plant such as a grape vine that also has branches and leaves. Both the grape vine and tree produce branches, and those branches cannot exist without the trunk or the vine. Try to imagine branches and leaves hanging in the air without a vine or trunk to support them. It can't happen. It won't happen. We might have walked through the woods and seen branches and leaves without trunks, and they were all dead. The branches were lying on the ground like defeated soldiers. They once had a tree to support them, but they broke off and dried up, and they have lost their color, and lost their life. Autumn leaves look nice carpeting the ground, but they soon lose their color, and get trampled into the dirt, until they become dull, uninteresting dirt themselves.

Jesus tells his disciples that vine branches without the vine can produce no fruit. If they don't have the life energy coming from the vine, then the branches cannot produce fruit, for they themselves would be

dead. Jesus says, “I am the true Vine. I am the Source of your energy and vitality and productivity. You are the branches, attached to me. Branches will never produce any fruit, if they are separated from me. However, if you abide in me and I abide in you, you will receive energy and vitality and productivity. You will produce much fruit.”¹

Producing fruit: that is the main purpose of a grape vine. It isn't there to look fancy. It isn't there to be admired. It is planted into the ground to make grapes, and that is it.

If you ever saw a grape vine, you would think there isn't much to it. The branches themselves are unattractive: some of them thin and scrawny-looking, some of them thick but cracked and crooked. The leaves just kind of hang there – they aren't anything to write home about. The vine branches hang from wires that are attached to wooden posts, which are separated by dozens of feet. A vineyard is a vineyard, and it isn't there to look attractive or to be admired. It is planted for the sole purpose of growing juicy grapes.

Jesus says, “I am the true Vine, and you are the branches.” There is a passage from Isaiah, in which Jesus is described as the Suffering Servant who came

¹ Cf. John 15:1, 4.

to bear our afflictions. Isaiah describes the Suffering Servant as One who “had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him.” There was “nothing in his appearance that we should [find great delight in] him.”² But then Jesus, the true Vine, didn’t come to us to win a popularity contest. He did come with his hair combed properly, and his skin and teeth glistening in the sun, and in the best clothes a person could wear, so that people may flock to him and worship him as an idol. This was not the reason for his arrival to earth as a Babe. His sole purpose, Isaiah reminds us, was to be “pierced for our transgressions [and] crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Along the way he was rejected and despised, and we counted him as a man of sorrows.

If Jesus the true Vine had a purpose on earth, so do we as his branches. That purpose doesn’t include looking good and being the object of people’s desires. With the way advertisements are thrown in our faces, all that matters in life is looking good. Achieve the body you’ve always wanted. Eat these products and never worry about looking unattractive. Whiten your teeth with this toothpaste, and if that doesn’t work your dentist will whiten them for you.

² Isaiah 53:2.

I heard a podcast in which women of all ages are under attack to look perfect. Advertisements are targeting them with highly-attractive women with beautiful long hair, precisely-placed make-up, and shiny long legs, and those ads are making women feel bad that they don't look as good as those sparkling models. There are 70-year-olds out there wearing miniskirts, getting laser surgery to remove varicose veins on their legs, having Botox injected in their lips. We all seem to have a fascination to look good, and we must always look good, or people will talk about us. Heaven forbid, we don't want that.

If we are the branches attached to Jesus the Vine, then we are who we are. We don't need miniskirts and Botox and nose jobs and extra muscles to serve the God who loves us. We are attached to Christ for the sole purpose of producing grape. Grapes that God the Father would want us to produce. Grapes of compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Grapes that people see and are influenced by, not because of anything we do but because of what God is doing through us. Grapes that people want to receive and even want to produce themselves, so they desire to become attached to the Vine. I have told my cute little daughter a number of times, "You might be beautiful on the outside, but if you are not beautiful

inside, you will look downright ugly to others.” As we bear the fruit that the Vine Jesus is helping us produce, we will look beautiful inside and out.

Jesus says, “I am the Vine, and you are the branches, *and* my Father is the Vinedresser.”³ That’s interest. Why would Jesus insert that little sentence: “My Father is the vinedresser”? Pruning is another way we describe vine dressing. Pruning is the process of cutting away unwanted branches and leaves, so that all the energy within the vine goes to producing grapes. If branches and leaves are not cut away, then the vine takes all its time growing those things and not the grapes. According to Squidoo.com, a website I happened to google, pruning keeps the vine in balance. When you prune away at least 95% of the previous year’s crop from the vine – whether those branches are dead or not – you will have a vine that makes “more fruit than it knows what to do with.”⁴

Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and you are the branches, so that means you need to be pruned. Daily. God is the vinedresser, and he will prune us in the ways he sees fit.” Why do we need to be pruned? Because we tend to become overgrown. We waste too

³ Cf. John 15:1.

⁴ <http://www.squidoo.com/pruning-grape-vines>.

much energy growing certain leaves and twigs in our lives that produce no fruit. Our lives become clustered and unmanageable, and we don't know what to do with ourselves because we are such a mess. Have you ever seen the TV show Hoarders on A&E? Some of us look like that, because sin takes over every square inch of our being.

God prunes us of everything that is unnecessary. The need to talk back. The need to hold onto anger and stay unforgiving. The need to do things on our own without asking for help. The need to blame others for our problems. The need to point the finger at others and judge them. The need to point the finger at others, when we know we are at fault. The need to lie and act like we are innocent. Etc., etc. God cuts all the dead branches away, cleans the house from top to bottom, so that we would stop wasting precious time on the things that don't matter, so that we spend more time on the things that do.

When I served as a chaplain during summer camp at Camp Calvin, I told the campers what I constantly need to be pruned of: making caustic comments about other drivers. It is so hard not to think that everybody else cannot drive, and so you have to say something in the small confines of your car. I once saw a cartoon, in which a man is in his car amid traffic, and he is

making comment upon comment about the other drivers. In the last panel, you see all the cars in traffic, and all of them are saying together, “Why is it that I’m the only one who knows how to drive?” We can laugh at the silliness of thinking every one else cannot drive, but caustic comments can turn into anger, which turns into being upset with everyone we encounter with during the day, which turns into the day being totally rotten and useless, which turns into others feeding off our anger and getting upset with others, all because we think we are the only good drivers out there. There is something we need to be pruned of, and God stands there with shears in hand. Sometimes God stands there with chainsaw in hand. He is fixin’ to do some major pruning in us.

If we remain as one of Christ’s branches, and he is our vine, then God is going to shape our lives so that we become productive branches. God will show us our sin and convict us of it. God will not stop showing us how ridiculous we look, as we hold onto that sin; and we will feel ashamed. This is when we need to come to God in forgiveness, lay that sin wide open before him, and repent (turn away from) it. During that same time at camp, I asked the campers and staff to write down on a piece of paper those things they need to be pruned of. Then I asked them to take those pieces of

paper and throw them in a trash bag, because we don't want them anymore. Later we burned them at the night's campfire. That is what it is: trash. Like hundreds of white and black plastic bags of garbage filling a person's home, because he or she is a hoarder. Like a tree trying to hang on to life, as it holds onto dozens of dead branches that have no leaves on them. God wants to prune us of all that stuff. We don't need it. God is ready to cut it away, so we are not burdened by it.

We who are the branches connected to the Vine are happy to have God the Father prune us. If we and God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit abide together – live in an ever-growing relationship together – then we welcome the pruning. We welcome the cutting and cleansing that God the Father offers, because it means God loves us so much to give us a better life. We get to live a different life, a fuller life, a more joyful life, not just now but forever.