

The Fruit-ure of Crestwood  
John 15:1-8  
May 8, 2022  
Kory Wilcoxson

I like trees. Aren't trees nice? I like their majesty and their colorful foliage and the little things they do to be helpful, like provide oxygen. I enjoy the shade they provide, and I don't even mind raking up their messes. I like trees. But I don't like their branches.

You see, twice now in my life I've been attacked by a tree branch. Minding my own business, keeping to myself, then WHAP! The first time, I was bending down to pick up my dog, and as I rose up and turned, a tree branch leaped out hit me right in the eye. I had to get stitches in my eyelid. And then while riding an open-topped bus in Paris, France, the branch of a tree we were driving by leaped out and smacked me in the face. Mon dieu! Now, I'm no arborist, but I'm pretty sure tree branches aren't classified as predators. They just don't like me.

This poses a challenge for me as I read Jesus' words. "I am the vine and you are the branches," he says. This is an intriguing analogy that Jesus makes. The Bible uses a lot of imaginative imagery for the church. In the Bible, the followers of Jesus are called disciples (that's pretty good), sheep (a bit smelly, but I get the metaphor) and sinners (that one is true, but a little blunt). We're called the children of God, a holy priesthood, a cloud of witnesses. Paul compares us to body parts like eyes and ears. Peter calls us living stones that build God's house. But here, Jesus compares us with branches of a grapevine. God's the gardener who tends the vine – Jesus – from which grow the branches – that's us. What is Jesus saying about us?

Well, it helps to understand how this agricultural phenomenon works. A grapevine is like a highway and the branches are like exits. As a vine grows, the branches connected to it produce both fruit, like grapes, and flowers and leaves. The more the branches produce the flowers and leaves, the less energy they're giving to producing the fruit. If the gardener just wants a plant to look green and pretty, he lets it grow. But if the gardener wants the branch to produce fruit, he prunes it back to where the fruit is growing, so that all the energies of the plant are focused on producing the fruit. So a branch may look good because it has a lot of leaves and greenery, because that suggests a healthy vine. But it's all show and no tell, it's all style and no substance, it's all plant and no fruit.

Jesus is warning us about this, about not producing fruit. We all know other people who fit this mold, who are interested in looking good and being seen but who don't produce any fruit. And we know we're not like that, right? But our lives sometimes tell a different story. We get caught up in the busyness of life, running around like crazy, juggling so many appointments and responsibilities. And it feels good to be seen as busy, right? No one likes to be thought of as lazy or unmotivated. But the question Jesus would ask us is this: Is all the effort producing any fruit?

Well, to answer that question, we need to define what fruit is. Paul tells us in Galatians that the fruits of the Spirit are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Those are the fruits that our faith produces in us. So another way to ask that question is this: Do the choices we make in our lives produce those things in us, or keep them from growing? Do the things we do that keep

busy give us more joy, or less? Do they make us more patient? More gentle? More faithful to God? More loving?

The church is not an exclusive community but an inclusive one, so we have to turn that question out. Bearing good fruit not only means what's happening inside of us, but how that affects those outside of us. In other words, to bear good fruit means to live lives that help other people see that they are also branches of the True Vine. Bearing fruit means helping other people come to know the love of Christ through our behaviors and actions toward them. We are the channels, the conduits, the seeds that give life to their faith. And the more loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and in control we are around them, the more they see the fruits of Christ in us, and the more they desire to be fruitful as well, to be connected to the life-giving vine we know as Jesus Christ.

But that's a lot of responsibility, isn't it? I can't just stand here and say, "Go be more patient...right now! All your unbelieving friends are going to get thrown in the eternal fire and burned if you're not more peaceful!" But you'll be glad to know that it's not all up to you. That's another reason why this vineyard imagery works. In a grapevine, the branches are so intertwined they are almost completely indistinguishable from one another. It is impossible to tell where one branch stops and another starts; all of them run together as they grow from the central vine. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on the other branches and its relationship to the vine.

So bearing fruit is a corporate act, not an individual one. To God, all the branches are the same. There is no status or hierarchy; there's no pastor branch or elder branch or team chairperson branch that's more important than the others. The only way to tell the branches apart is by the fruit they produce. To God, we are all the same. There's no status, no hierarchy in God's kingdom. We all come from the same source and are all connected to the same vine, Jesus Christ. The only thing that distinguishes us is the fruit we produce. We can't ride someone else's coattails here, claiming to be part of a church yet not doing our part to be God's hands and feet. "I'll sit here and look like a pretty flower, you go and bear fruit." No, we are all called to bear fruit in our lives.

What kind of fruit are you producing? Is it Grade-A, top of the line, or is it a little green? Is it sweet and juicy, or taste like sour grapes? Is the last fruit you produced so old it's turned into raisins? If God were to take your fruit and make wine, would it be deserving of a cork or a screw-top? Are our lives producing fruit that others can see? That's the bottom line here, Jesus says. Doesn't matter what kind of show you can put on, how often you go to church or how much you give. What matters is this: Are you bearing fruit?

To do so, Jesus tells us we must be pruned. Ouch, that doesn't sound like much fun. What does it mean to be pruned? I don't think it means God causes bad situations in our lives that bring us pain. God doesn't give us cancer to make us more fruitful. That's not the God I believe in. But I do believe God is at work in all situations, good and bad, to help us grow more Christ-like. Jesus himself says in v. 3, "You have already been pruned by the word I have spoken to you." We are pruned when we are paying attention to and following God's word, when we allow ourselves to be led by Jesus' words to bear more fruit. Maybe we come to that realization ourselves, or a friend points it out to us, or we read something in scripture, and we realize we have thoughts or behaviors that are taking away from our focus on God, and need to do some cutting in order to channel our

energy away from just looking good so that we can focus more on doing good. Anything that stands between us and God – our possessions, our attitude, a relationship – needs to be pruned.

Pruning can be a painful experience. Choosing to live more simply, giving up an activity in order to prioritize God, ending a destructive relationship – these things are not easy to do. But think of the opposite: Not enough pruning makes a branch completely unproductive. It stops focusing on the fruit. But trusting in God through these experiences can make us more fruitful. While we don't always control the events around us, we do control our response to them. What if we saw a long line as a chance to practice being more patient? What if we saw voicemail as a chance to rethink the words we were about to say? Maybe a person's angry response to us could be a chance to bear the fruit of gentleness or self-control. How would our faith change if we chose to look at these situations as an opportunity to be cut back a little so that we could bear more fruit down the road?

Life will continually put us in situations where we will have the opportunity to bear the fruits of the Spirit. We are constantly dealing with things in our lives that will change who we are. Are you the same person you were last year at this time? Of course not. Each year we grow and change based on our bodies and our age and things that happen around us. And our faith is impacted by those things, as well. Your faith won't be quite the same next year as it is now. Things will happen, little things and big things, which will change it. Some things will be steps forward, some will be steps back. In all of these experiences, how will you stay connected to the Vine and keep bearing fruit?

Today, we start our spring stewardship campaign, when we look at our time and talents and decide how we can use them to serve God here at Crestwood. Your bulletin insert gives you a plethora of ways you can use your gifts and passions to make God's kingdom real here in Lexington. And if you don't see anything on that list, write in something else! There are plenty of ways to plug into the ministries at Crestwood, and we need every vine producing fruit in order to fulfill our vision and mission.

“I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me bear much fruit.” I believe God has great things in store for Crestwood as we stay open to the ways God wants to use us – our gifts, our time, our resources – to really make a difference in this world. Sure, we may need to prune some things in order to be more fruitful, but that's a part of growing together in faith. The question to always be asking is this: “How is God using me to bear more fruit?” I may be going out on a limb here, but I believe the fruiture of Crestwood is going to be richly abundant with life-changing acts of faith! “This is to my Father's glory; that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be disciples.”