

Jon Hauerwas – April 10, 2016 – “Fruit Bearing”
1 John 4:7-8, 16-21 and John 15:1-5, 8

Jesus knew how to connect with people. He spoke their language. Not just their vernacular, but he spoke about the kinds of things that were familiar to them – like the earth that they inhabited, and the working relationships that filled their days, and the ways that they addressed one another at home. In Jesus’ parables, he spoke to ordinary people using images that were readily available to them. He suggested that God, like them, is a sower of seed. He highlighted workers in the vineyard to make a point about the economy of God. And he addressed issues at the heart of their livelihoods, like those found between sheep and their shepherds.

These images weren’t isolated, but were carefully woven throughout the Old Testament scriptures, as well. And, on each occasion, we see that the Old Testament is actively informing the New. Just consider this. In Genesis, we find God at the center of all that is life-giving. God creates, and then tends to creation like a gardener in Eden.

Next, I invite you to remember Easter Sunday. Two weeks ago, we heard an account from John’s Gospel. Mary Magdalene was there, grief stricken, visiting the site of Jesus’ tomb. The text says that she came face to face with the risen Lord. And yet, curiously, she failed to recognize him at first. We don’t know why. Perhaps, she

was overwhelmed by her grief. Or maybe, she simply couldn't fathom the miracle of the resurrection. Whatever the case, Mary mistakenly believes him to be the gardener.

Now, this imagery of God as a gardener is rich, powerful, earthy language that flows throughout our scriptures, linking God and Jesus, creator and creation, the great gardener and the fruit of the vine. Jesus, mistaken for the gardener at the time of his resurrection, is there with God at the very beginning, working the soil, scattering the seeds, and preparing for all that is to come. Jesus, the true vine, is poured out for us on Good Friday, and remembered this day in our shared celebration of Holy Communion. Yes. The bread and the grapes we now share bear witness the fruitfulness of his life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

The mystic pastor Meister Eckhart once wrote “that a plum brings forth plums not by an act of will but because it is its nature to do so. So the worshipping community – gathered around Christ, partaking of Christ, allowing the being of Christ to flow unimpeded into all the branches – produces what it, by its nature, must: godly fruit of compassion, loving-kindness, mercy, patience, wisdom, love.”

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¹ Cherwein, Susan Palo. “Living by the Word.” *The Christian Century*. April 29, 2015. Pg. 20.

These are the same themes that we discussed in the children's message. And this is what Paul had in mind when he wrote to the church in Galatia, "the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control." Yes. This is how, according to one famous hymn, "they will know that we are Christians... by our love." I am convinced that it is by our fruitfulness that we bear witness to what we believe. And, as Meister Eckhart suggested, we can do no other. It's in our very nature.

On Friday, my five year old son was walking home from school with his mother. She told me that as he approached our yard, his face filled with joy. "Look, Mom," he cheered. "A sign of spring." At his feet near the lamp post in our yard was a solitary tulip in all of its glory. Then, without any hesitation at all, he stooped down and plucked the flower from its stem. "This is for you, Mom," he explained with great sincerity, "because I love you."

Kara's heart was torn. She told him how much she appreciated his grand gesture, even as she asked him to leave the tulips in place going forward. But, with Saturday's snow storm bearing down on us, it was hard to be too disappointed, and this sign of spring is still bringing hope to our kitchen table, a temporary reminder that warmer days are coming.

Like other men in my family, I have always enjoyed gardening. There is just something beautiful about the symmetry of it all. And in the midst of my toil, I remember these words from Jesus in our second lesson this morning. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide 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. I 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.”

Jesus’ words highlight for us the powerful, interconnected nature of our lives. The bushes and trees of this world require light and soil for their life and survival. So too, God’s people require both creation and sustenance – the services of a master gardener. At times, our branches are pruned, bringing out the greater symmetry that lies within. In other moments, parts of us are yanked out like ferns from a shadowy corner and relocated to a position of greater prominence and beauty in a garden. And at our lowest moments, some parts of us are dug up, like roots from a stump, to make room for something new.

Surely, our time on earth would be so much easier if it was only about life and never death. If it was all parties and no funerals. But even good things eventually come to an end. This we know very well. That even that which was once full of life will one day make room for something else – something which also has the potential to bear much fruit. And so, after another season of light and life, of pruning and cutting, and of eventual decay, new life will spring forth once again.

This is the promise of the resurrection, the promise of the master gardener, and the promise of the fruit of the vine. Take and eat. Take and drink. This is the foretaste of the kingdom. May it be so and all thanks be to God both now and forever.
Amen.