

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham  
I Am the Vine and You are the Branches  
The Rev. Dr. John Judson  
May 16, 2021

Isaiah 5:1-7; John 15:1-17

Something was supposed to happen. When he flicked the switch something was supposed to happen but this time nothing happened. I can't tell you what grade I was in in high school or what class it was, all I can remember is that it was one of those wonderful days when the AV guy brought in the projector and we got to see a movie instead of listening to a lecture. For those of us of a certain age we understand that we had movies in class. There were not videos or DVDs or things on the internet, but there were films. The AV guy would bring in this large projector, take the film out of the can, put the full reel on one spindle and an empty reel on the other. Then the projectionist would carefully wind the film into the projector, test the tension and hit the switch. The projector would whirl to life and we would watch. But this time nothing happened. The AV guy asked for the lights to come back on. He checked and rechecked everything. But still nothing. One classmate behind me suggested that the projector wasn't working because the electric cord had a knot in it. I just shook my head. Then a voice from the back of the class said, "Is this supposed to be plugged in?" We all turned and looked, and there in this person's hand was the plug. "Yes," was the reply from the AV guy. The person plugged in the cord and what was supposed to happen happened and we watched the movie.

Something is supposed to happen. This could also be said of us branches being connected to Jesus' vine. Something is supposed to happen. The image that Jesus uses, that he is the vine, and we are the branches has rightly been understood to signify the mystical union between ourselves and Jesus; the mystical union that allows the Spirit to move from God, the vine planter, to Jesus the vine and then to us, the branches. It is the mystical connection that allows for the fruit of the Spirit to manifest itself in us, filling us with the love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, and self-control. It is the mystical union that makes us all friends of Jesus. The image of the vine and the branches is also an ancient one that was used by the Psalmists and the prophets to describe God's relationship with the people of Israel. God was the one who planted and cared for the vineyard; that cared for God's people. But for both the Prophets and Jesus there was more to this connection than a mystical union. Something was supposed to happen. That something is that the branches are to bear fruit. And if we listen to Jesus and Isaiah, we learn that the branches are to bear three kinds of fruit, each in its own season. And so, over the next few minutes we will examine each of these seasonal fruits.

Season one bears the fruit of love. The fruit of love is at the center of Jesus' message about the vine and the branches. Jesus says, "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love...this is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends." Love is the foundational fruit from which the other fruits grow. It is foundational because the love Jesus describes is a love that turns human hearts outward. It causes human beings to see "the other" not as a stranger but as someone worthy of compassion and care. It is a love that says the needs of others are equal to, or perhaps even greater than my needs. This is the love that God demonstrated when God sent Jesus into the world. This is the love that Jesus will demonstrate on the cross when he gives his life for the world. This fruit of love is what first grows when we are the branches on Jesus' vine.

Season two bears the fruit of righteousness. It may be that many of us are uncomfortable with the term righteousness. That may be because we have associated righteousness with moral or religious perfection, or we have tied it to the idea of being self-righteous, meaning those who think they are morally or religiously perfect but are not. But neither of those ideas gets at the heart of what righteousness means. Righteousness means acts of

compassion and service. It means doing, what Judaism calls, “tzedakah” which means giving money or goods to those in need. While many of us might like to call this kind of giving charity, the fact is that charity is an optional giving for the sake of giving. Acts of righteousness are offered in response to the love that God has poured into us, that have turned our hearts outward toward others. Righteous acts are physical expressions of love. This idea is at the heart of Matthew 25 where Jesus says that we are to feed the hungry, give water to the thirsty, house the homeless, visit the prisoner, clothe the naked. This is what Isaiah means when he combines righteousness and cry. That where people do not reach out in righteous acts, people cry out in hunger and despair. The fruit of righteousness then are individual acts of compassion and kindness that grow from love.

The third season brings the fruit of justice. Justice is love that works to create the kingdom of God on earth. In other words, while righteousness is personal acts of love offered up, justice is understood to be communal love that creates the kind of world God desires. The fruit of justice has two elements. The first element is that all persons, regardless of class, wealth, nationality, or citizenship are treated equally before the law. This equal treatment is based in the very story of creation in which all human beings are created in the image of God and have the breath of God breathed into them. Thus, every human being is deserving of the same treatment as every other human being. The second aspect of justice is equity. Justice equity does not mean merely equal opportunity, but it means those who have greater need are to be given what it is that they need so that they have enough. This means that a just society is to be one in which there are not a few who have too much, and others who have too little. This is the reason that Isaiah combines justice with bloodshed, because where there is no justice there is no peace. This is so because where there is no justice, people crush and kill others in order to gain more and more, or those who have been unjustly treated rise up to take what is rightly theirs. Justice is fruit that grows from love and righteousness.

Before we close this morning, I want to offer you what I consider to be one of the most wonderful examples of how these fruits work. In 2007 the Rev. Dr. Kate Thoresen and her husband, Tom, were invited to a summit called Save the Children. The summit was to address the plight of the children in the Foster Care system. Because Tom chaired the missions committee that had helped to fund the event and Rev. Kate was a pastor, they were invited to speak about how congregations could support the kids caught in the foster care system. To learn more Kate and Tom began to listen to the stories of adoptive and foster families. The more they learned, the more they felt called to help. This is love at work. This is what happens when one is connected to the vine. This desire to help led to the Thoresens to create the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care in 2009 and to Rev. Kate becoming a Parish Associate here with her portfolio being Foster Care. That Coalition allowed many of you listening today to turn your fruit of love into fruits of righteousness. I say this because you and thousands like you turned your hearts outward to give money, clothing, prom dresses, baby supplies, computers, furniture and so much more. The branches were bearing great fruit. This past week, these acts of love and righteousness moved into the realm of justice. I say this because the foster care community became aware that the state of Michigan, because of a loophole in federal regulations, was confiscating social security and SSI money that was owed to foster children, whose parents had died or who had physical and mental disabilities. The state confiscated those funds in order to replace any funds the state spent on the children. The children can obtain some of the money if they request it, but foster families were never made aware of this. In addition, any excess money not used by the state was not given to the foster child when they turned 18 but was sent back to Social Security. It was to this injustice, children not getting what they are legally entitled to because they are poor, is what is leading many members of the Faith Community Coalition on Foster Care to begin the hard work of trying to change the law. This is what happens when the branches are overloaded with the fruits of love, righteousness, and justice.

This morning my challenge to you is to ask yourselves, where am I bearing fruit? I ask this not to see who has born the most fruit, or to guilt people who feel as if they have not born enough fruit, because we are all in different seasons of fruit bearing. I ask this simply because something is supposed to happen.