

The Place of Pruning

John 15:1-8

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March 20, 2011 – Morning Sermon

In the area of pastoral care I constantly have to come across people who are going through various stages of adversity and I know a few passages in the New Testament that give us more perspective and comfort in times of adversity than this one. This is a profound message that we read from John 15:1-8 in which Jesus says

1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

May God continue His blessing as we now study His Word together. Let's pray.

Father, we thank You so much for Your Word which You have spoken personally and intimately to each one of us by Your Spirit, by the Words of this text and Lord I pray now as we open Your Word together that You might touch us where we live, touch us where we need touching and encourage us by Your presence. I thank You for each precious person here. Now use this time in each one of us for Your glory. We pray in Jesus' Name, Amen.

The story goes that in that small community that it was a dark and stormy night. All the power was out in the community and only one paramedic was able to make it to the house of Heidi. She was a young mother who was about to give birth to a child and this one paramedic needed some help so he marshaled the assistance of Heidi's daughter, Caitlin. Caitlin was a precocious three year old

and he realized immediately that Heidi would not make it to the hospital to deliver the baby so he had Caitlin stand by and hold the flash light for him. A few minutes later young Conner was born into this world and the paramedic picked him up by the feet and swatted him on the bottom. The baby started to cry. As he made the mother and the baby very comfortable he turned to a very wide eyed three year old and asked her, "What do you think of what you have just seen?" Without pausing she said, "He shouldn't have been in there, spank him again!"

I like that illustration. I like that story because it reminds me in a sense to our reaction to this passage. We know of something that is beautiful, wonderful and a blessing of a birth and yet Caitlin could only see something that was bad, something that needed to be punished. Sometimes when we come to a passage like this that speaks of God's work in us it really is a beautiful and wonderful thing to imagine as I hope you will appreciate when we finish but sometimes it looks awfully hard and difficult. We don't like necessarily what we see and what we read.

John 15 is a marvelous passage and it comes in Jesus' ministry toward the end after Jesus has just enjoyed the first Lord's Supper with His disciples. Now He wants them, after they have drunk of this wine and eaten the bread, to turn away from these elements and to focus on Him. He wants to stress in this first verse as we look at this passage, two very crucial points. The first point He wants to stress is that He is the Real Vine or as the English Standard Version says, the True Vine. It's a very provocative message. To us it might not mean like much but to the Jewish audience, those disciples, it was an amazing statement. It was provocative not because it was referring to the Lord's Supper "I am the True Vine" but because it touched on the identity of Israel itself.

The Old Testament on numerous occasions spoke of Israel as being the vine of God. In Psalm 80:8, for instance, the writer says "*You brought a vine out of Egypt; (speaking of God) you drove out the nations and planted it (speaking of Israel).*" In Hosea 10:1a says "*Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit.*" If you were with Pastor Reeder, Dave Matthews and the group that is over in Israel today and you were driving around Jerusalem you would see numerous government cars. The emblem they have on the side of government cars is a vine with a large cluster of grapes painted on the cars which is taken from Numbers 13 where the spies went into the land and came back with a cluster of grapes, a symbol of God's blessing on this nation. Part of their identity to be a vine is to be a blessing to the world.

In this John 15 passage Jesus does something as I said that is very provocative. He says "I am the True Vine" and in doing so He was telling those disciples that they would no longer gain their chief identity from their ethnic origin or from the nation that they were from but they would gain their identity from Him because He is the True Vine. In fact, He even builds on that and He says that no spiritual achievement that they would ever do would be possible apart from Him. He says

“I am the Vine, you are the branches and he who abides in Me, he bears much fruit for apart from Me you can do nothing.” With those words He sweeps aside all other attempts we humans, all other religions we may conjure up, all other philosophical ways we may have to do spiritual things effectively because He says “Apart from Me you can do nothing.” Jesus said, “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life, no man comes to the Father but through Me” and that was every bit of provocative then as it is today in our culture. Jesus says “I am the True Vine.”

Then in so many words He makes another statement. He stresses another crucial point. He says His Father is interested in fruit production. He calls Him a Vinedresser. He is interested in fruit production in you and me, His followers, in those disciples. In the Gospel of John when Jesus talks about His ministry He almost always includes His heavenly Father. They are always pictured as working together, in the same direction, working in concert with each other. The Father doesn't head this way and the Son that way. They always appear to be working together and here it is the same. Jesus speaks of His Father as the Gardener who carefully watches the vine and the branches. Jesus sees Himself as the Vine and He sees His disciples and all His followers as the branches because the branches connect to the Vine and they are not there to run wild and crazy. They have to be taken care of and watched vigilantly. That's what the Vinedresser, God the Father does.

We live in a day and age that once we know we're connected to the Vine we think we can do whatever we want do and this is a passage that reminds us that God has a far different agenda, because when we connect to the Vine He has some definite purposes, procedures and processes that He takes us through as we're connected to Christ. His goal for us as branches is for us to produce fruit.

When we talk about fruit in the Scripture you may say “what do you mean by fruit?” The most obvious verse we would look at would be Galatians 5:22-23a where the Apostle Paul speaks of spiritual fruit, which says *22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control...* He lists those Christ like qualities that the Spirit produces in us. That's what fruit is and this should fill the lives of all believers. Later on in Ephesians 5:9 Paul says “*for the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true.*” So the fruit from Galatians 5:22 and many other passages is something that God wants to see produced in us. That's part of His agenda for our lives.

You may ask another question like “Why is it so important to see that fruit?” There are many reasons. We could probably spend a whole sermon just talking about the reasons for spiritual fruit but in this context Jesus wants us to appreciate that the fruit serves as the mark of our authenticity. Spiritual fruit is the distinct mark of our authenticity before a watching world for others we come in contact with. John 15:8 says “*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*” The proof is in what comes out of us – the

proof of the connection between the branch and the vine. In Matthew 12:33 Jesus says *"Either make the tree good and its fruit good, or make the tree bad and its fruit bad, for the tree is known by its fruit."*

Years ago when we were on vacation as a family, me, my brother and my two sisters we were probably in elementary school. We vacationed for a number of years in St. Petersburg, Florida and we would travel down I-75. I remember a place distinctly where we could look out the rolled down windows of the car back then and we would see rows and rows of trees stretching out to the left and to the right. I remember on one of our trips one of us asking my dad, "What kind of trees are those." Our dad said, "Well, they're orange trees" and of course we were dutifully impressed. We didn't know our dad understood horticulture and all that stuff. We were impressed until one of us asked "Dad, how do you know?" There was a long pause and my dad said, "There are oranges hanging from them." Our dad didn't know a lot about horticulture at all. My sister does because she is a horticulturist but my dad doesn't. He just knew that if that tree had oranges hanging down from it then it's an orange tree. That's the way it is with plants. If you want to know what kind of plant it is you can look at the fruit of most plants and you can determine precisely what kind of plant it is. The fruit confirms the nature of the tree.

Jesus knew that and so He comes into this passage and begins speaking about fruit. Where does this fruit come from, we might ask. Again, we could spend a lot of time discussing how God puts that fruit in us but we know that it doesn't just magically appear in us like we would like. No, it comes as a product of God's work in us in several ways. One is by His Spirit. Galatians 5:22-23a says *22 But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, 23 gentleness, self-control...* It comes by the work of the Spirit in all believers. Fruit comes through the Gospel as the Gospel is preached and we embrace the Gospel. Paul writes in Colossians 1:5b-6 says *5b ...Of this you have heard before in the word of the truth, the gospel, 6 which has come to you, as indeed in the whole world it is bearing fruit and growing—as it also does among you, since the day you heard it and understood the grace of God in truth.* The Gospel when it is preached bears fruit not only in terms of conversions around the world but even in our lives as we live by the Gospel, as we continue a life of repentance and forgiveness. In embracing Christ we begin to bear the fruit of the Gospel.

God's work in us through the Spirit produces fruit in us. Through the Gospel it produces fruit and also as we by faith love God and on a daily basis seek to obey God and His principles of Scripture, God's Law, if you will. William Hendrickson is a commentator who wrote some long articles about this passage in the Gospel of John. He said, "These fruits are good motives, desires, attitudes, spiritual virtues, words and deeds all springing from faith in harmony with God's Law and done to His glory." Hendrickson was right. God is at work in us by His Spirit, through His

Word, and through the Gospel producing fruit but this passage tells us that it doesn't stop there. This is a remarkable, profound passage.

God intervenes because that relationship between the vine and the branch constantly needs attention. So Jesus uses an analogy from horticulture we know as pruning. Pruning of course was that process of taking a plant, removing dead branches that are no longer needed but even trimming back healthy branches so that they'll do their job even better so that they'll bear more fruit. The term pruning would have been very common in that agrarian culture that the disciples lived in but most of us appreciate it. Most of us at one time or another have plants that we know need to be pruned. Just yesterday my wife was working out in our backyard working on our knock roses, pruning those trees down.

Years ago when I was in college I went to Furman University. I'm a Furman University paladin and there are a few of us in this congregation. Furman University is in Greenville, South Carolina and it's a beautiful campus. In the center of the campus is a large rose garden with dozens and dozens of rose bushes. They are quite beautiful especially in the Spring and they give a great aroma all during the year but during the winter something remarkable happens. One day you are walking through that garden and it has big bushy roses that are sometimes four and five feet tall and then one day in late winter there are no bushes. In fact, all that is left are scrawny little stubs about eight to ten inches high. Little stubs are all that is left. I went to that school for four years and saw that process four times and it never failed to produce in me skepticism. How on earth are those poor little bushes ever going to come back? I knew they would but it was just so pitiful seeing those little tiny stubs right there. Sure enough though within a matter of days you'd begin to see some greenery shoot forth. In a few weeks you would see some buds begin to blossom and within a month or two you'd have some delightfully, beautiful rose bushes again. They would never be aromatic, beautiful and a joy to see unless they had been pruned the way they had been pruned. That is exactly what Jesus is talking about in this passage.

What does pruning look like? We don't really have time to explore the ways that God might prune you and me. For instance, He may sometimes permit difficulties in our lives or our relationships to kind of capture our attention, to show us our need of Him and draw us back to Himself. He might deprive us on other occasions of something in our lives that is really attracting our attention. It may not be sinful but it may be something that is really distracting us from Him. Sometimes He may discipline us by the use of certain circumstances, people or relationships in order to make sure we don't wander down a path of sin that we shouldn't go.

Make sure that this is something that we as believers alone don't experience. We find in Scripture that Jesus Himself was subject to pruning. The writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 5:8 "*Although he (Jesus) was a son, he learned obedience through what he suffered.*" Can you imagine? He was perfect and yet He was

afflicted in this life with certain circumstances that He suffered that brought out a maturity even in the life of Jesus Himself.

It is here that we need to point out two very encouraging truths from this passage about pruning. Number one is pruning is a work of God's grace. So often we see it as negative kind of like Caitlin watching that birth unfold. It was not something that she found to be positive at all. Sometimes we hear God's pruning work in our lives and we don't find that to be positive either but Jesus would say "No, no, no, no, it should be seen as good." It is the work of God's grace, the work of a Gardener who wishes to take the fruit in us and create more and more lushes fruit in our lives.

As we read this passage we notice two things about pruning. Number one pruning is not punishment. Certainly in the example I gave about Jesus a few minutes ago it was not about punishment but even with the disciples Jesus says in John 15:3, *"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."* He viewed His disciples as having been justified. They had been saved, set apart and are His followers. He is not speaking of pruning because they needed to be punished for being bad. They weren't disobedient yet God continues to see the need to cleanse them. We call this the process of sanctification. It is that cleansing process that occurs in our lives. Hebrews 12:5-6 speaks of it from a little bit different angle when it says *5 And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons? "My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. 6 For the Lord disciplines the one he loves, and chastises every son whom he receives."* This is a pattern for God's work. This is His agenda for you right now, today, is that fruit production and nurture.

Merrill Tenney is another commentator on the book of John and he writes this on this passage; "In pruning the vine two principles are generally observed. Number one all dead wood must be ruthlessly removed. Number two the live wood must be cut back drastically. Dead wood harbors insects and disease and may cause the vine to rot, to say nothing of being unproductive and unsightly. Live wood must be trimmed back in order to prevent such heavy growth that the life of the vine goes to the wood and rather than to the fruit." That's what God is interested in us, not so much as our comforts as our fruit production that might flow and abound in our lives. Pruning is not punishment but it is His work of grace.

The second thing about pruning is pruning is productive. It comes from the Father and its part of His plan to work in us and make us more like His Son, Christ. John 15:2 says *"Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."* Not all adversity in our lives will come with equally loving motives. We know we have adversaries out there but the point in this text is the difference between cutting which damages and pruning which enriches is found in the technique and the character of the cutter, the Vinedresser, so to speak. He wants us to bear

fruit. He wants His church here to bear fruit and it will always be productive. It's not punishment but we find that indeed it's a work of God's grace.

Secondly, pruning is not only a work of God's grace but it's a mark of God's grace as well. It's a very important mark. Jesus identifies two kinds of people in His Kingdom, two kinds of people to whom the Gospel is preached who come in contact with Christ and who appear to connect with Him. One group, are those who accept the message. In other words they come to close contact with Christ and the Gospel and they understand the Gospel. They embrace it and ask Christ to come into their lives. They are truly justified and they begin in their lives to bear fruit as they abide in Christ and live with Him on a daily basis.

There are also those who reject the message. While they may come in close contact to Christ where they are church goers, appear to the world as believers and appear to accept it, but they don't truly abide. They don't truly begin to produce fruit in keeping with righteousness and they prove to be unfruitful like the parable of the soils. They are like the seed cast on the thorns or the rocky places. They don't produce fruit and Jesus would say "In the end they will be taken away. They will be allowed to weather but they will be picked up and thrown into the fire and burned." We certainly see the classic case of this in Judas who was a follower of Jesus. Hendrickson writes this; "Consider Judas who just left the party there at the Lord's Supper. Outwardly by all appearances his relationship to Jesus had been very close yet he was on his way to destruction. It would seem natural in speaking of branches that do not bear fruit that they are taken away." Jesus was thinking of men who like Judas, once stood in very close connection with Him but had left and was on their way to destruction.

There are two kinds of people, both were in a sense in the Vine but not in a saving union with Christ. Both were cut but one was trimmed and cut back so it might bear more fruit and the other eventually was cut off and destroyed. We're not talking here about someone who has fallen away from the faith, who was a true believer. That was not Judas' case. He might have appeared as a faithful follower of Christ but in the end he proved that was never the case. Jesus is very pointed here. He wants us to understand that fruit production is that important mark of God's grace in our lives. It sets us apart. It shows those who are truly followers of Him. So it's not just an optional addition but it's something that He takes control of and He wants to produce in our lives.

So I would ask at our conclusion, what is our responsibility? What are we called to do? It's interesting that in this passage Jesus never calls on you to produce fruit. He's not looking to you to say "Okay crank it out!" He doesn't say read Galatians 5:22-23 and do it. That's not His priority here. What does He say is our responsibility? We are called to abide in the Vine. That is to remain in the Vine, continue in the Vine. We are to remain in Christ and continue in Christ. That's intended to be our preoccupation, not so much that we produce fruit but we abide in Christ and in that relationship fruit is produced.

There are some miserable Christians out there who have forgotten that. They have decided that they are going to start producing fruit and they try and try and try. Christ is in a sense left behind and they are frustrated. You will never find a vine producing good fruit that has ulcers like some Christians get ulcers trying to produce good fruit. Our responsibility is to abide in Christ. It is to draw close and continue in Christ and I would suggest we do it by giving you two words that start with the letter “f”. The first is that we *fasten* ourselves to Christ by faith. We live in the grip of grace. We constantly turn to Christ and re-turn to Christ by faith. That’s the way the Gospel started and that’s the way we came to Christ in the first place but we continue to fasten ourselves to Him in the highways, byways, difficulties and struggles of life, rather than necessarily rushing to other resources first and there may be other resources that may help, but we first need to cling to Christ and come to Him.

The second word that starts with the letter “f” is that we *fertilize* our relationship with Christ. We do this by the reading of God’s Word, through prayer and worship like you’re doing here. We do this through the meditation on Scripture and through this fellowship we enjoy together. I have made an interesting observation. Most of you know I was a pastor for twenty years in a church in North Georgia and it was my Sunday routine to get up and preach. It was part of the job and I enjoyed it but I found something interesting when I moved here and was no longer preaching on a regular basis. As I was sitting out in the congregation listening to sermons being preached I discovered something interesting about Sunday morning. I discovered I really needed to come to worship. That might sound really funny but normally I had to come to worship. I had to prepare for sermons, hours upon hours but when I in a sense didn’t have to do that I found how easy it was to wander into other things, think about other things and see worship as a little bit less necessary. Now I work here so I have to be here but at the same time I realized how crucial it is for my daily relationship with Christ to come and worship on a regular basis, to hang out with other believers, to hear God’s Word preached on a regular basis, to get myself challenged, and to buckle up those aspects of my life that are lazy.

You might be saying “What are you talking about, of course you knew that?!” Well, I’m not sure I really did know just how essential it was for me to come and worship when I didn’t have to prepare a sermon to preach. It’s a remarkable observation. I just know that worship is such a vital part of maintaining my relationship, fertilizing my relationship with Christ so that fruit might be produced.

I have a little obvious point I want to make here. Briarwood Presbyterian Church is not responsible for your spiritual growth. This church is not responsible for my spiritual growth. The buck stops with me in my relationship with Christ. Now indeed God has provided this church as the environment that enhances spiritual growth – the preaching of the Word, the teaching of the Word, the sacraments, the fellowship, the worship – and all of that is important and indeed essential in

the fertilizing process but Pastor Reeder is not responsible for my spiritual growth. My boss, Benny Youngblood, is not responsible for my spiritual growth. The buck stops with me and that's what I think Jesus wants us to appreciate so much that God very lovingly and tenderly comes into my life to nurture me along, to prune me so that I might bear more fruit and I am called to abide in Christ and remain in Him.

Abiding reminds me that in God's sovereignty that I bear some of the responsibility in this fruit production. Paul writes in Philippians 2:12-13 *12 Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, so now, not only as in my presence but much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, (that is what I'm to do in fertilizing my salvation to produce fruit) 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.* This should be a great source, opportunity and delight for us as we fertilize through our spiritual disciplines and see God begin to grow spiritual fruit in each one of our lives.

The result is that it should produce great joy. Sometimes when He prunes me back through various means that might cause gripping and complaining on my part but it doesn't need to then look at John 15:7 which says *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* Jesus gives us an amazing truth for those whom God prunes, those who are truly united to Him. He says "Ask me, pray, come before Me with your needs and your requests. Ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you." Now does that actually mean that when we ask Jesus will give us exactly everything that we want? We know that if we pray according to God's will He will answer.

Jesus Himself in the garden of Gethsemane expressed the torment of His human nature by praying in Luke 22:42 *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me. Nevertheless, not my will, but yours, be done."* In doing so was His prayer a waste? No, nonsense, of course it wasn't. It was an honest expression of His heart to God the Father. God gave Him what He was calling Him to receive. He went to the cross obediently. Did God answer His prayer? Of course He answered His prayer but perhaps not precisely in the way that He had asked but Jesus in that moment, in that dynamic relationship with His heavenly Father enjoyed a privilege that you and I have as fruit bearers in the Kingdom of God. God cherishes those moments when we fertilize our relationship with Christ, when we desire Him and seek after Him.

I had a professor in Seminary who was my advisor. His name was David Hesselgrave and he had been a missionary in Japan for a number of years. He had come back and earned a doctorate and then was teaching at the Seminary for a number of years. He was a professor of missiology which was the study of missions. In it he had a little motto he used to share with his students about how they should enter another culture when they seek to minister. He says "There are two things you need to do if you're going to minister in a foreign culture as you

get to know the people. Number one is you need to love their language and number two you need to love their babies.” He is absolutely right.

When you find someone that really wants to learn your language and know how to communicate they are really interested in you. Secondly when they love those babies you have, I know that nothing brings more pride to my heart than when someone compliments one of my children. It just means the world to me. I’m like that because God has made me that way and because God is that way. Nothing pleases God more than when we love His language, His Word, that He has given to us personally that we can read and then when we love His Baby, the Lord Jesus Christ. When our priority is following Christ and we love Him what a delight that is to our heavenly Father, especially in times when He knows perhaps we need some pruning to occur but that doesn’t discourage us or cause us to run away. It indeed causes us to come to Christ, to fasten ourselves to Him and to work to fertilize that relationship so that we might bear the richest fruit possible. That’s the challenge for each one of us.

Are you in the midst right now of a very difficult set of circumstances where you want to get away and find a solution as quickly as possible? Technically there is nothing wrong with that but perhaps you need to bring a Biblical perspective that maybe God is doing something in your life that is far broader and more dynamic than you might have ever dreamed. If you can remove a difficulty then certainly do it but at the same time say “Lord, have you brought this into my life so that I might just love Your Son even more and bear even a richer fruit that will give You the glory and praise and honor?” May that be the case. Let’s pray.

Prayer:

Lord Jesus, I thank You so much for Your many, many blessings and I thank You that you don’t just give us Your Spirit but that You personally take responsibility for working in us to produce the kind of fruit that not only will bring You glory but will bring us great benefit. Lord, I confess that I’m like one of those branches that wants to connect itself to the Vine and then just run wild. I don’t mind growing in all the wrong directions and becoming too much of a burden to the Vine but Lord You know that is a very devastating way to live and I pray that as You continue to prune and draw each one of us to Yourself that we might delight to know You. We pray these prayers in Jesus’ Name and for His Sake, Amen.

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