

WGUMC April 29, 2018 “Vine Tasting”  
Acts 4:32-35 and John 15:1-8

If you thought we were going to have a wine tasting this morning, I’m sorry to disappoint you. It’s not communion Sunday, so we aren’t even serving grape juice. But I can share with you an interesting historical anecdote: have you ever heard of Thomas Bramwell Welch? He was a 19<sup>th</sup>-century Brit who came to America and became a dentist and a minister of the Wesleyan Methodist Connexion, one of the smaller Methodist groups, known for their staunch opposition to two things: slavery and “intoxicating liquors.”

As a young man Thomas was active in the Underground Railroad, but he also wanted a non-alcoholic “wine” for communion, so he developed a process of pasteurization to keep grapes from fermenting. Dr. Welch’s Unfermented Wine became Welch’s Grape Juice. Just some Methodist trivia if you ever want to impress people at a party.

Getting back to vine tasting. Growing wine grapes was as big a deal in the Jordan River Valley back in Jesus’ day as it is in Napa

Valley today. So when Jesus used growing grape vines as a metaphor for how God's kingdom grows, everyone could relate to what he was talking about.

Now if he had been here in the heyday of the Valley of the Heart's Delight, he might have talked about growing fruit trees, instead. Long gone are the thousands of acres of cherries, prunes and cots that were here and only the street names are left to remind us. But I'm glad the parsonage has a plum tree in the backyard. It's way overgrown, but every year in late June, I climb up as high as I can and pick the plums to pass out at VBS.

I'm afraid that I'm not a good fruit farmer. I don't know how to prune the tree, and even if I did, I'd probably say that I was too busy. Because the branches are so long, they aren't strong enough to hold the fruit and sometimes they break off. By now, the tree has a funny shape and some of the best fruit falls into my neighbors' yards.

I got to thinking about how that misshapen tree is like a lot of us. Living in Silicon Valley, we know that overgrowth happens. But we don't know how to prune our lives, and we are far too busy to do it, anyway. To tell the truth, we don't really want to, because pruning hurts, at least at first. But not pruning is even worse. Our limbs get too long, our strength is spread too thin, and as life goes on, our branches get heavier and heavier until we start breaking.

What we need is someone to come and clean up our mess. That's why Jesus calls God the vinegrower, because God is the one who comes to remove every branch that bears no fruit and prune the ones that do so that they bear more fruit.

I wanted to know more about this process, so I looked up the basics of pruning. I learned that there are three things you have to do. First, you have to clean up. By the way, the Greek word for "prune" also means "cleansed." So when Jesus says that we are "cleansed by the word," he means that we are "pruned by the word." Interesting way of putting it. When farmers clean up fruit

trees, they prune away what is dead, damaged or diseased, the 3 D's.

Let's think about how that applies to our life. We all have things inside of us that are dead, damaged or diseased. We are carting around the ashes of dead relationships. We are carrying around damage from our childhood. We are communicating diseases that we picked up in our work or home environments or on social media or by watching TV. Eventually, we can no longer produce good fruit because we are putting so much of our energy into branches that are just about to break. There comes a time when we have to prune them away.

But that's just the first step in the process. The next thing a fruit farmer has to do is thin out. To have a healthy fruit tree, you have to thin the canopy. The branches need plenty of light and air around them so that they breathe. That boosts fruit production and helps the tree fight bugs and disease. So the farmer has to choose

which branches are best and remove the ones that are growing downward or too close and crowding out other branches.

Translate that into human psychology. I think we could all use a little more light and air in our canopy. That means that we have to set priorities. We have to make hard choices. That means removing what is taking us in a downward direction.

I know a lot of parents who are struggling to make good choices. They don't like it that the demands of their jobs and their families dictate the priorities for their spirits. I know how crowded out they can feel, how suffocating their schedules can be. I know how hard it is to breathe and bear up under the weight of it all and to keep from growing in a downward direction, because I've been there, too.

In fact, I'm not too proud to say that I need help to get through this. I can't do it on my own, no matter how many trails I run or labyrinths I walk. And what's more, I don't believe you can, either. It's got to be a group effort. I don't much care what the

group is: Bible study, book study, video class, dinner group, prayer circle. I don't care when or where it meets. I don't care who leads it. As long as it requires a commitment and the people in it will hold each other accountable for showing up, I want to be there. I need more light and air.

After we have cleaned up and thinned out, then maybe we'll have the determination to head back. That's what farmers call the third stage in the pruning process. It amounts to giving their fruit trees a haircut. It seems counterintuitive, but each year farmers cut back a good portion of all the new growth on all the branches. That promotes shorter, thicker branches that can hold more fruit.

The same logic works in our lives as well. When we are in school, we are growing fast in all different directions. We are learning so much about so many different subjects that we think we know it all. But then we get to college and discover that we have to declare a major. We have to narrow our field of study so we can deepen our knowledge enough to do something with it.

Same is true for our spiritual lives. I know folks who practice a cafeteria spirituality. They try a little bite of everything and that's fun and exciting because it spurs in us a lot of growing. But if the branches of our spirits grow too long and gangly, if they start to grow cross-wise and at weird angles to each other, we aren't going to be strong enough in any faith or fruitful enough to do anyone much good.

For some of us, it's time to get a spiritual haircut. It's time to head back to some core truths, some basic beliefs, so that we can thicken up our faith and deepen our experience of God and be more fruitful in our lives. It's time to get reacquainted with the vine.

After we have pruned away all that is dead and damaged and diseased, after we have thinned out all that we don't need so that we can breathe, we can finally head back to Jesus. Because what is left after all that pruning is done is nothing but our true and truly beloved selves. And what is our true self but Christ who lives in us? That's what it means to get to know Jesus. We don't go out to

meet a stranger. We go in to meet someone we've always known. When we find ourselves, we will find him. That's what it means to abide in him as he abides in us.

Jesus says, "I am the vine." But we can only be his branches if we are willing to be pruned by his word. And we are not the only ones who need pruning. The Church needs it, too. There are things about Christianity today that are dead, damaged or diseased and need to be pruned away. Some of our traditions have gotten a little overgrown. As a consequence, some congregations are thinning out. And maybe that's exactly what needs to happen. That way we can bring in some light and fresh air, so we can breathe. We just have to be sure that our attitudes don't take us in a downward direction. A good pruning will make the Church grow more faithful and fruitful.

Here at Willow Glen, the task of heading back starts with looking back at the first disciples in the Book of Acts. In Chapter Two it says that they devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers. [Acts



2:42] And they were able to do this because in Chapter Four, we read that they were of “one heart and soul,” they shared everything they had, there was a great power at work among them and “great grace was upon them all.” [4:32-33]

The Christian story is about us trying to get back to this original community that was so firmly anchored in the true vine. For years, the life of this congregation was rooted in the apostles’ teaching. Seventy or eighty adults went through the Disciple Bible program, a 35-week intensive Bible study. But they didn’t just learn a bunch of facts. That was secondary. They built transformative relationships. And they grew in their faith and discipleship. The biggest thing that we are missing today is that kind of adult fellowship.

As we pull together a team next week and charge them with helping us produce more fruit, I hope you’ll join me in thinking and praying about what we need to prune around here. We do a darn good job of pruning our children and youth, and they are producing

much good fruit. But there are older trees in this orchard that need tending so that they can produce fruit, too. Men and women, busy parents and empty-nesters, newly divorced and never married, native born and new to the neighborhood. There's a lot of pruning to do.

But here's what gives me hope: every once in a while, I get a foretaste of the fruit that is ripening on our vines. In the past couple of weeks, some of our very busy guys have put together a GoFundMe campaign for the Zwingman family. They met with Tom, learned about Sarah's situation, and encouraged him to reach out for help. The Zwingmans left for Mayo Clinic a week ago. While they've been gone, the donations have started to come in. And as we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus Christ, we become like that first community in Acts where God made sure that there was not a needy person among them. I told the guys, "this is church."

That not only gives me hope. It gives me joy. And here's the promise: the more you abide in Christ and let Christ abide

in you, the more his joy will be in you and your joy will be complete.