

Isn't God's Vineyard Beautiful?

By: Keith Holste

May 3, 2015. Pastor Keith preaches on John 15. Jesus is the vine, we're the branches, and God is the gardener.

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We further reflect on this passage in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

It's sometimes difficult, when reading the New Testament in English, to know what is meant by the word "you." We don't have a good way in English to describe a singular "you" from a plural "you," and so sometimes we don't know if we mean a group or one person. A friend of mine has suggested maybe we should always use the word "y'all" for whenever we mean "you" for "bunch of people." Well, today's gospel has one of those "y'all" kinds of meanings when it says "you." When Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you," he means, "You all abide in me."

Well when Jesus spoke these words, it wasn't a happy time. It was a meaningful time and a serious time, because he was at the Last Supper with his disciples. It happens early enough in John that Jesus is preparing his disciples for what will happen the next couple of days. He has a long talk, before they break from this Last Supper, go to the Garden of Gethsemane, and he goes on trial. But this speech, including these words "abide in me," is at the heart of it. He's saying as a group they need to remain together. He will remain or abide with them, even as he parts from them, and they are to abide or remain with him. It works both ways. But they are to be close together. And he knows it's going to be a hard time for them, and they will need each other and they will need him. It was hard for them to do right away. Jesus knew how hard it is to keep up this kind of spirit of love and abiding in him. Right away he was betrayed, and right away he was denied. So right after he gave the speech, they were in this risky time and they failed to do that. And so it points out, even for us, how difficult this is to do — to stay close to Jesus and to stay close to one another — given the hardships, the temptations of life, whether we're in a very tense situation, whether we're in a life-threatening situation, or whether we're just in a matter of convenience or public reputation. Maybe it's hard to pronounce, be bold with our Christianity. It can be hard to be a follower of Jesus. He knows we will need his life to support us. We need him. But we are the ones he depends on to get his spirit into the world.

When John writes this, some 50 years after this, the issue is before them as much as ever. The question is of tense. There is no Jesus present with them then to ask about it. So they have to remember these words of John and Jesus. What does it mean to be a community of the Christian faith? What does it mean to be a person of the Way, as they called the church in the early days? John is saying that it means being together as a community, and it means being connected to Jesus. They as a group are like a bunch of branches on a grapevine: they have a common source of nourishment, and they're all subject to the vinegrower — the one whose vineyard it is. They produce for the vinegrower, but their branches are so intertwined when they're on the trellis, when they're on the fence, that it's hard to tell them apart, because all the branches get intertwined when you get out to the ends of it where the grapes are. You think about when you have a grapevine you have the basic trunk that comes out of the soil. Then you have the larger branches that come from that. Then you have these vines that go out further and then drop the drapes down. And as it goes out they become smaller and smaller, but the bunches of grapes are large. They're all pretty similar. There's not one that's bigger than another. They all kind of look alike. They are intertwined and it's hard to tell one from another. The clusters of grapes hang down from the various branches, but they're all kind of mixed up together on the vine. The grape picker

comes to the vine and picks the one that's closest. He can't stand there a long time and say well, this is the one I want to pick. They just pick them all and put them in the baskets and go on. They're all together there. No one is greater than another.

That's the kind of image that John and Jesus want us to have of the church. It's about thinking of the fruit we produce as a community in Christ. But it's not so much about what *I* produce or *you* produce. It's what we do *together* as we live close to the one who gives us life. It's not that I produce fruit for the church or you produce fruit for the church, but we do this together as a community.

In the early church there was a lot of duress. Christians weren't normally welcome with the Jews. Nor were they welcome with the Romans. And it's commonly thought that John was in exile as he was writing this. The best way for Christians to make it and to have an impact was to be in community together, and that way they could not just survive but often thrive. They belonged to an organized community shaped by the love of Jesus. What they did as a community was more important than what they did as individuals. As a Christian community, the members were known for the acts of love they did in common with the other members. In those early days they lived together, and then they acted together. They were one community in Christ.

When a vine grower looks at the vineyard and the grapevines within it, the target that the vine grower has in mind is a whole target. What will my harvest be this year? How many gallons of grape juice or how many pounds of grapes will I get from this vineyard that I have? The crop will be measured by the overall yield, not by what this plant did or by what that plant did. All of it is together. The gardener will pay attention to each plant during the year so that it's tended to and it's pruned, for the sake of the whole vineyard, so the whole overall yield is good. But the primary concern is the whole crop. And so with the church, each person is tended to by the Lord, and all are equal before the Lord, each producing the fruit. Each has a place in the faith community as a whole, all living with this common goal of living in the style of Jesus, the style of love. All are accountable to the standard of love set by Jesus, making decisions together based on the love that Jesus taught. Jesus paints here a picture of a community of faith, embodying the love of Jesus, acting as a community, producing the fruit of love. The mark of this community lives faithfully and loves the name of Jesus, rather than identifying itself by the individual member saying, well we have this member, we have that member. No, it's about how the church acts together. It's so tempting, so often we hear this passage and think of it in individual terms. We think of it as kind of a motivational shot to get me or you to do more good works, to produce more fruit individually. It's helpful to remember that we are in a vineyard together. God looks at us as a whole vineyard tied together in Jesus. As a whole we produce the fruits of the spirit. We do some individually, and individually we act on behalf of the community of faith. But it's good to step back and take stock of how we are doing together as the vineyard of the Lord. Are we together as a community in Christ doing well at producing the fruit of the spirit in love?

Each one of us of course has a place in this vineyard. There are different gifts. There are different circumstances we each have which make a difference on how the love of Jesus is lived out. Some of it is done as members of the church in various life circumstances, with one's family or at work or in the community. Some of it's done though acting in community with others of the congregation, to live out the love of Jesus, doing things like going down to Humanitree or whatever, doing these things together. Just as the vinedresser pays attention to each plant and the vines of the plant, nurtures and prunes that plant as appropriate, so each of us has a responsibility for the good of all to live and act in ways that work for growing the love of Jesus.

Well this love of Jesus that we live with and by shows itself in two ways in the congregation, the

community of the beloved, as John's community was often called. It's a love that's lived out inside the congregation and outside of the congregation. And it's kind of encapsulated in the vision statement that has been discerned over the last couple years and been adopted by this congregation. And part of that vision statement is to live well within the community of this congregation, to develop meaningful relationships, and to care for one another as a community of people loved by Jesus. But this vision also looks to take this love out and to share the love of Jesus with the surrounding community and reach out to bear fruit in love. When we do this it brings meaning to life, life as it was intended by God, fulfilling our purpose and our need for meaning by producing the fruit of love in the vineyard of God.

A news story, I think it was last weekend, of local interest caught my attention. It was about the Magdalene House. Some of you have an association with it, I think have done some work with Magdalene House and know maybe more about its operation than I do. But it is a Christian-based organization which helps young women who are victims of human trafficking to find refuge, and to get out of it and to learn a new way of life. A new shelter is being constructed for this organization in St. Louis. And the topic of the news story was that this new shelter being built had been robbed, and that thieves had come and stole many of the building materials so that the project was hampered in being finished. They couldn't go on. And the young men were apprehended who had taken the stuff, and the normal conclusion was, you would think as the story progressed, that they would be arrested and dealt with by the justice system.

But I think the key part of the story was that Magdalene House took a different approach. The thieves were young men of the neighborhood, and the leadership of the house reckoned that the young men were victims too in a sense. Just as they cared for young women who were victims, these were young men, victims of the poverty and the tough life circumstances of their neighborhood. And the house said they need help too and declined to press charges, demonstrating to the young men the same kind of grace and love that they hoped to give to the young women, which is the work that Magdalene House stands for: caring for, helping young people — women normally, in this case men as well. But it was a demonstration of a Christian-based organization, a whole community making a stand, instead of one or two people saying this is what we'll do, acting as a group to say, this is how we are discerning the love of Jesus for us at this place. They acted together. In a way that's what we're talking about this morning. How do we as a congregation, as a group, make decisions that reflect the love of God?

There's a yard on the opposite end of the block where we live which I like very much. It has kind of an oriental theme in its landscaping. Both by tree selection and by pruning I would say it's in Japanese style. I've been by it many times and seen it but never noticed before this season how beautiful the redbud tree is in that yard. And it's not just that it's a great burst of lavender and purple and just has lots of flowering buds. But it's pruned in such a way that the shape of the tree is beautiful in itself, with the tree branches very visible themselves. And they in turn enhance the beauty of the redbud blossoms. It's a beautiful sight. The pruning makes the tree's shape nice as it displays the redbuds of this season. Well I think in a way, that tree can kind of capture or symbolize what our gospel's about today. It's a thing of God's beauty to see a congregation live out what it's called to be in Jesus. It has many parts, many people who blossom in different kinds of ways. But the shaping of these people, to serve an overall goal of being beautiful and producing fruit in the eyes of God, requires thoughtful and loving attention. We can be people who come together. We receive the Lord, and then return to blossom in our individual ways. But when Jesus calls us we are really vine together. How do we shape things together as a group? As our community is shaped together, we are that much more effective as ones who inspire others to think: isn't God's vineyard beautiful? I want to be a part of it too. We can do even more together than we do individually.

Each one of us as individuals have done personal pruning in our lives. We have habits. We have attitudes that we've let go of so that we can embrace better ones. And we're usually glad about that. We say: I'm glad I left that behind so I can live my life more richly now. We also look at ourselves today and we say: what changes do I need to make even now to make myself a better person, to be a better branch in the vineyard of Jesus?

We can do that same kind of pruning as an assessment of our community of faith, too. Are there habits, are there behaviors, attitudes our congregation has let go of that we feel good about, that we've moved to a new place? But in the present we ask what are the habits? What are the behaviors? What are the attitudes now that need to be pruned away, so that we can produce more fruit for the good of God's vineyard? It's never easy to do this. It's always been a challenge for the church. And so often the decisions we make, the decisions that reflect the love of Christ are resisted, because usually it means reaching out to people who aren't popular in other places. The disciples got to know this very well. But it was the resurrected Lord who gave them the promise and the faith and the hope to go forward. In this Easter season, we're reminded of the same Easter promise of the resurrected Lord, who gives us the promise, gives us the hope and the faith so that we can remain in Christ as he remains in us in love, and we can go forward as well. In Jesus' name we pray this will happen. Amen.

*** Keywords ***

2015, Christ Lutheran Church, Webster Groves, sermon, podcast, transcript, Pastor Keith Holste, John 15:1-8