

GOD'S GREEN THUMB

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For the last several months, we've been looking at stories from Jesus' life as recorded in the book of John. We'll look at just a couple more over the next few weeks and then we'll begin a topical study on worship. We say it's a core value for our church, but what does that mean?

This morning's text is a little different than the other passages we have looked at in John. Everything up until this point has been an event or situation involving Jesus. Today, we're going to look at some words of Jesus.

They're important words, because they were spoken in the last hours of his time with his disciples. Because that is when he shared them, we know they represent some of the most important truth he wanted to convey. Let's take a look.

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

"I am the vine." This is the last of the "I Am" statements Jesus makes in John. As you may remember, these statements all tie back to God calling himself the great "I Am" in the Old Testament. They are Jesus' way of identifying himself with God the Father – Usually analogies that help us understand who he is. We've looked at several:

I am the bread.

I am the living water.

I am the gate.

I am the good shepherd.

I am the resurrection.

I am the way, the truth and the life.

And now "I am the vine." Here we are, deep in the heart of American suburbia, talking about a farming story this morning. We've got a vine, branches, a gardener, pruning,

fruit...It's a whole different world than NE Tacoma. Jesus used the culture and word pictures of his day to get across his message.

Even a couple generations back, this story would have been very easy for people to relate to. Karin's grandpa, who just passed away, was a farmer. One of my grandfathers was a farmer. Most of us would not have to go too far back in our family tree to find a few ancestors who knew how to work the land.

For us, it's not quite as relateable. We're citified. For the most part, we're a little further removed from the food chain. And normally, good preaching will look at how to reframe Bible stories in ways that are more current. In this case, there's really not a better metaphor. Even if we aren't working in the dirt every day, it isn't difficult imagery to understand, and the closer you look at it, the more you realize it's the perfect way for Jesus to communicate what he wanted to in this situation.

From cover to cover, the Bible uses the metaphor of a garden. Gardens and plants are used in explaining God's relationship with his people. One of the first things God did was plant a garden and put people in it. If we summarized the story of Adam and Eve, it would be that they turned their backs on God and gave up their right to the fruit from the tree of life.

Then God chose a people out of their descendants, and he called them his garden. But they rebelled, too.

Isaiah 5:7

The vineyard of the LORD Almighty is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are the garden of his delight. And he looked for justice, but saw bloodshed; for righteousness, but heard cries of distress.

And so Israel suffered the consequences of their choices. After giving them multiple chances, God said enough is enough, and he let the nations raze the vineyard to nothing but stumps. But Isaiah predicted it wouldn't totally be the end, because God still loved his people. There was even life left in the stump.

Isaiah 11:1-3

*A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him —
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of power,
the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD —
and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.*

That, of course, was Jesus. And that's why he said of himself, "I am the true vine." God was introducing a new way for his people to start over, a new way to be his true people, and it was going to be centered in Christ.

And by the time you get to the end of the Bible, the book of Revelation, you have the tree of life again. Only now, people have access to it again.

Revelation 22:2

On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.

What was lost in the beginning has been restored through Jesus by the end.

That's all by way of background to this passage. When you look closely at what Jesus has to say to his disciples, you can see that his primary concern seems to be about fruit. He mentions it seven times in 8 short verses. So what is this fruit and why is it so important?

Jesus isn't giving a gardening class here, but he does communicate quite a bit about fruit in a short period of time. He's not talking about literal plants, he's talking about spiritual matters. But if we expand on his use of the garden theme, we can see how it translates naturally into spiritual matters as well.

So welcome to horticulture 101. Now if we were east of the mountains and owned a peach orchard in the Yakima Valley, what would we want to do? We would want to get as many peaches out of the orchard as possible, to maximize the yield. Why? Because that is what a peach orchard is for. To produce peaches. I believe the same is true for us as Christians. God wants to maximize our fruit production. It's maximizing our potential, because it is doing what we were created to do.

What does that require? The first thing you need when you want to get more fruit is:

A living plant.

We're really getting down to the basics here. You can't get fruit without having a source of life to produce the fruit.

When we were first married, Karin and I had a set of ornaments in the shape of apples. They were fairly realistic, and Karin would hang them all over the tree. But hanging fake fruit on an evergreen tree doesn't make it an apple tree, and it doesn't make the fruit real.

You can't manufacture fruit. You need a living source to create it. That's a key principle in what Jesus is trying to say. Without a relationship to Jesus, it's like trying to hang fake apples on the tree.

What are we talking about when we say fruit? Paul gives us one list of examples.

Galatians 5:22-24

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.

Now you might be thinking, “I know lots of people who are able to be patient and kind but who aren’t Christians. In fact, I know a lot more people who aren’t Christians who have way more gentleness and self-control than the Christians I know. How can you say that people who don’t know Jesus can’t produce fruit?”

Good question. My response would be to ask the question, “What is fruit?” Fruit is really two things. First, it is a byproduct of life. It is the natural result of a living tree or plant. Secondly, it contains the potential for future life. If you remember studying fruits and vegetables back in school, you’ll remember that fruit is like a big snack pack for the seeds that are inside.

Now scientists have been able to create hybrids that give us things like seedless oranges and seedless grapes, but fruit is really there to carry along the seeds of future life.

When we’re talking about the kind of fruit Jesus means, it is fruit that contains the potential to carry the life of Christ to more people. Sure, there are hybrid forms of gentleness, kindness and so on. You don’t have to know Christ to demonstrate those qualities. But it won’t be fulfilling the ultimate purpose of those qualities which is to act as fruit that plants seeds of truth in other peoples’ hearts. You need the living source for real fruit.

That is such a huge relief. It means we’re not responsible for creating the fruit. We don’t have to grit our teeth and try hard to be nice people. If it’s really fruit, it will be the end result, the by product of the life of Jesus that is in us.

The next thing you need is

A careful gardener.

Jesus tells us that if we think of him as the vine, then we should think of God the Father as the gardener.

Last Sunday afternoon, John and Marisa Hale came over to our house and looked at our back yard. There’s not a whole lot to see at this point. Mostly patchy grass. But we invited them over to look at it because they have done a great job landscaping their own yard. They have good ideas for what would grow well in different locations, how to shape the flower beds.

Karin and I look at our yard and can’t see a plan. But they could. John actually sketched out a layout for us, and he came up with a recommended lists of plants we’d never even heard of.

Getting a good crop of fruit takes a gardener's plan and skill. Listen to Isaiah's description of how God goes about gardening.

Isaiah 5:1-7

I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well.

Do you remember Johnny Appleseed? The man who went everywhere, just planting apple seeds across the country? He was not a gardener. He was all about volume. Seeds were being planted, but not cultivated by him. He just hoped if he planted enough, some would come up.

God goes about his work carefully. He digs in our lives and clears the stones out. He puts up a watchtower to guard our hearts. And he plants the choicest vine in us, the true vine.

We are not just left to grow on our own. We're not out in the wild somewhere. We're in God's own garden, and he is devoting his personal attention to our lives.

Psalms 37:23

*The steps of the godly are directed by the LORD.
He delights in every detail of their lives.*

One of the ways he shows his care is the next point. To get the most fruit, we're going to need

A bit of pruning.

If I were a rosebush, I imagine I'd be really happy about having a good gardener giving me mulch and fertilizer, watering me, maybe even putting ladybugs on me to take care of aphids. That would feel great. But then if I saw them coming at me with the pruning shears, I'd probably change my opinion.

We like to know we have God's attention until we see that he's got some trimming to do in our lives.

But good pruning is essential to the health of the plant. It can stop the spread of disease. Pruning shapes a tree and makes it more attractive. But most importantly, pruning improves the yield and the quality of the fruit.

There are easy pruning decisions – the dead branches with brown leaves. Those are obvious. But there are more difficult choices as well, because sometimes healthy branches need to be trimmed back.

You might think that more branches will mean more fruit, but the opposite is true. Too many branches can require a lot of energy and effort to grow, redirecting life and energy that would normally go into producing fruit. So good gardeners will trim back some branches, making it easier for the tree to yield a better crop.

Not all growth in life is good growth. Think of what areas in your life are sapping time and energy but yielding little fruit for God's kingdom. They may look like they're good, healthy things. But are they taking away life that could be better spent somewhere else?

My sister and her family moved to Phoenix last summer. My brother-in-law got a promotion, so they moved there from Vancouver. It was a big move for a family with 4 kids that has never lived anywhere but Washington. We went to visit her over Christmas, along with my folks. And my brother-in-law's family visited immediately afterwards. My sister called last week and said it was a real let down for her after we all left. She had looked forward to it so much, and then it was over and she had nothing but her life in Phoenix. To top it off, they had originally hooked up with a church there that had ties to their Vancouver church, but because of where they ended up buying a home, they needed to find someplace closer. So they had to cut that tie as well. And my sister said it felt like God was pruning all her ties to home, and it hurt. So she was praying "Okay God, show me what it is you want me to do now."

That very next Sunday, in their new church, somebody tapped her on the shoulder and said, "Would you consider helping out in our youth ministry?" That had been an area that had been on my sister's heart. She was so excited that God would answer that quickly. But it took some painful pruning first to make room for what he had in store.

Jesus says that every healthy branch gets trimmed. That's God's way of improving us – not punishing us. So how does God go about pruning?

There's an interesting word play going on in this passage that once again doesn't come across very well when it's translated into English. But it goes something like this. First, Jesus says,

Every branch that doesn't produce fruit God trims off.

Then he says every branch that does produce fruit God trims back.

He then goes on to tell his disciples that they've already been trimmed clean, and he says that happened by the word he spoke to them.

Hebrews 4:12-13

His powerful Word is sharp as a surgeon's scalpel, cutting through everything, whether doubt or defense, laying us open to listen and obey. Nothing and no one is impervious to God's Word. We can't get away from it — no matter what.

God's word is extremely convicting, and when we let it get down into our hearts, and we reflect on it, his Holy Spirit will begin the work of pruning. He will show us what needs to go – what is dead weight. It is his word that has that effect on our hearts.

There's one last thing that Jesus shows us we need if we want good fruit, and that is

A branch that's attached.

If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

To continue to be productive, a branch needs to stay plugged in to the vine. Otherwise, it's pretty obvious that it won't be generating anything.

That has caused some great soul searching over the centuries. Am I remaining in Christ? How do I know? Am I being good enough?

That word remain is the key to understanding it. It means exactly what it says. You stay put. If I am here, standing in front of you, it doesn't take that much effort to keep standing here. It takes more energy to walk over to the side and leave my spot.

I was in the seventh grade when I got lost at the Puyallup Fair. Or at least I thought I was lost. We were in one of the exhibit halls and I was looking at this big display of vegetables. When I looked back up, my entire family was nowhere to be seen. So I walked to the entrance to the barn, and I saw hundreds of unfamiliar faces passing by – but no Peabodies. I was seriously stressed. But instead of leaving the barn, I turned and looked down the next aisle. And there they were. If I hadn't stayed in the place where I was, if I'd gone away from that barn, I would have been seriously lost. The answer came in remaining.

If we're starting in the right spot, remaining shouldn't be hard to do. We may be tempted to leave the spot, but it will take more work to leave than it does to stay.

I went to a small Christian college where most of the people were Christians. I had this friend named Pete Smeltzer. I can remember going over to his room and he would be all fired up about some truth he had just found in the Bible. His faith seemed really genuine.

He transferred schools, and the next time I saw him, he was really messed up. He was into the party scene big time and doing all kinds of drugs. He told my roommate that he didn't believe in God anymore. That was pretty sobering. If this guy who had been so totally plugged in could lose his faith, what did that mean for the rest of us? But my roommate asked him a very telling question. He asked, "was it your belief that changed first, or your lifestyle?"

Pete thought about it and had to admit that he had changed his life and his beliefs had followed. He hadn't remained, and once he walked away, his faith died. He was no longer connected to the life source.

Remaining isn't just sitting on a decision you made a long time ago. It is constantly living in that decision and operating in light of it. It also means staying connected to the

rest of God's family. It doesn't matter whether you plug in at New Day or another church, but it's important to make being with other Christians a priority.

Psalm 1:1-3

*Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked,
or stand in the way of sinners, or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of
the LORD, and on his law he meditates day and night.
He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose
leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.*

To really remain in Christ is to delight in being there, to meditate on it all the time, to think about how it relates to your life. As we do that, we will see fruit.

Psalm 92:12-15

*The righteous will flourish like a palm tree,
they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon;
planted in the house of the LORD,
they will flourish in the courts of our God.
They will still bear fruit in old age,
they will stay fresh and green,
proclaiming, "The LORD is upright;
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him."*

We've got a whole lifetime for God to use us. Even as old as Karin's 97 year old grandpa, we can bear fruit.

That brings us to our questions for the morning. First, am I growing fruit, or just hanging ornaments? Do I have a relationship with Christ that is producing something in me as a byproduct, or am I trying to generate fruit on my own?

Second, what branches in my life does God need to prune? Is there something that immediately comes to mind? Am I willing to ask him to show me what needs trimming?

Finally, am I cultivating my connection? Am I spending the time with God's word and his people to enhance my ability to bear fruit for him? Am I devoting time, thought and energy to focus on my relationship with him?