

St. Andrew's Anglican Church, Douglas, GA

The Rev. Fr. John E. Commins+ Rector

Scripture: John 15:1-11

"Are You Connected?"

Let me set the scene for you - in today's Holy Gospel Jesus – who is still in the Upper Room with His disciples – and at this time He gives us a very rich illustration. In this it is pretty clear that God the Father is the Vinedresser, or the “gardener” - the One who cultivates the vineyard in order to produce an abundant harvest. We are surrounded by farming. Just look at last year when the fields of corn didn't bring much fruit. I remember driving around in October and seeing fields of cotton just sitting there – not harvested – or harvested very late. This year we pray for a fruitful harvest – on this Rogation Sunday. Jesus is the VINE, the thick trunk that runs along the fence or trellis. We are the branches - those smaller vines growing out of the main vine. You know that my background is not about gardening, or about farming. I do know a few things about roses. I don't know much about grapes, except that we take the fruit of it every Sunday and lift it up to the Lord and He does something special to it. But I am more familiar with roses. My family, my mother was passionate about roses and I know that the rose bush needs to be pruned so that it doesn't grow wild and too big, stealing the light and nutrients from the rest of the bush – producing a lot of less beautiful roses. The pruning it down stops it from wasting its energy and being unproductive. I believe it is the same principle with the grapes and their need to be pruned. The vines need to focus their energy on growing good quality grapes instead of a lot of lesser ones.

The disciples in the Upper Room have in a sense already been pruned during their time on their days alongside Jesus – and they are about to undergo some more serious pruning in the next few days – that they never would have expected in a million years.

The Jewish tradition used the vine to represent the family of Israel. I am not talking about the country – but I am talking about a man – whose name was Jacob and when we say those descendants of Israel – the descendants of Jacob – and the twelve tribes. God brought the vine out of Egypt and transplanted it in the Promised Land. Jesus is now fine tuning this image by saying that He is the True Israel and God's Promises are resting upon Him. Those who follow Him and believe in Him are members of God's true people, His family – the branches connected to the True Vine. God spoke through the Prophet Isaiah in chapter 5:1-2 when He said: *“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. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit.”* This entire chapter from Isaiah tells of God's reaction to Israel's disobedience – (remember God called them a “stiff necked people”) causing the people to be exiled in Babylon from the Promised Land. God is a righteous God – and He promises redemption if people return to the vine – their ‘first love’ - but desolation to those who refuse. Further on in that chapter – in Isaiah 5:20-21 God promises *“Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes and clever in their own sight.”* The image of the vineyard was one that Jesus used to refer to God being the Landowner – and

the workers in the vineyard being the people. You recall the parable of the Workers in the Vineyard? In which a group came at 9 o'clock, and some came later, some even later, and some at the end of the day? When it came time to pay them all – the reward from the vineyard owner was the very same! God was talking about believers and the Kingdom of Heaven. It doesn't matter when you come to Christ. Some people always know Christ; some people find Christ or realize that He found them a long time ago – but they come to Him and submit to Him in the last portion of their life. Praise God that He is always looking for us and always wanting to care for us. These were images that anyone knowing the Scriptures would be familiar with. Jesus takes it a step further – and makes the image of the 'vine' and the 'branches' to be far more personal than about the nation of Israel, or the people of Israel – but this was a message for each believer – and that includes us.

On the night before Jesus died, in that Upper Room – Jesus had already told the disciples that they are in Him as He is in the Father. Jesus is describing the intimate relationship that we can enjoy with Him – but we need to cultivate that relationship. What can block our relationship with Christ? Sin does. If we are in Christ and not bearing fruit we have to see what is blocking the flow. You have planted a crop and it is just not looking so good. As a farmer you are going to have to do something to kick it into shape – maybe it is more water; maybe it is more nutrients. If we are in Christ – we need to look at our relationship. It is sort of like when there is a problem with your circulation and you need a bypass, a stint, or to have your arteries cleaned out. It is the same thing with our spiritual condition. In trusting in the Lord – we give Him permission to fill our lives with His will – and in doing so – He very well might prune us down. So how does Jesus prune us?

- He may move us
- He may have us change jobs
- He may even change our neighbors
- He moves us out of our comfort zones.
- He may even humble us, like he did Jonah, to bring us to someone else.

But the pruning is also just like refining us, bringing us closer to Him. Helping us to cut away the things that will hamper us – that don't allow us to grow into what we are supposed to be. In 1 Corinthians chapter 3 the Apostle Paul gives us many examples of things like boasting, jealousy, infighting, and more. God longs to refine us, to work with us in His forge, to mold us, using His Holy Fire to refine us, making us exactly what He wants us to be, and His discipline will strengthen us. I can't help but think of the words from James, the brother of Jesus, chapter 1:3-4 *"because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything."* In other words – being the person that God designed you to be.

There are two things we can do when God prunes us:

- we can either grow from it, flourish and bear much fruit -
- or we can moan and complain.

This year, at the Kiwanis tree sale Marilyn decided to take a step of faith. She decided to buy a lemon tree. The instructions were interesting. They said for the first year – when the flowers appear – nip them off. In effect you are pruning the tree. The man who wrote these instructions said that next year we should get some pretty good fruit. That reminded me of the woman school teacher here in South Georgia, who has a peach tree in her back yard. Unpruned, the tree grew big and leafy. And it was loaded with peaches, but the fruit was very small and pretty much tasteless. One year her husband was out of work, so he decided to go work on the tree – and make it be what it can be. When she came home from school one day and saw how far back he had pruned it, she stared in shock. "You've killed it," she cried. "Now we won't have any peaches at all." Boy was she wrong. That spring the pruned branches burst forth with a beautiful blanketing of pink blossoms. Soon little green peaches replaced the blossoms. "Leave them alone," She begged her husband. He ignored her and thinned the fruit. By the end of the summer the branches were so full with peaches that they had to be propped up. And the peaches – they were large and sweet and juicy! There was no denying it: the tree was far better off for the painful pruning and cutting it endured under the man's pruning shears. That is what God does for us. God prunes us for us to Grow.

So where are we in relationship to the Vine? Are we connected? If not, we have got to give ourselves over to Christ. Are we growing personally? Are we growing spiritually? If not maybe we need to seek His Will for our lives – instead of ours. Trying to do our own will in His name only results in failure – and that is pride. Doing His will in His Name will most certainly result in peace, blessing and success. Let me put it this way: branches that decide to go on their own – will spiritually wither and die. You know what happens to those. Those who stay connected to the 'vine' and get 'pruned' from time to time – will thrive and bear fruit.

Remember - Jesus is the Vine, We are the branches, and apart from Him we can do nothing! For me it seems so simple - we can either get connected to the Vine, or get burned in the fire, the choice belongs to each one of us. He is our only way to eternal life. Jesus said remaining in Him *"is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."* (John 15:8-11)

In the Gospel of Matthew 7:16-20 I found some similar words, and they ring so true: Jesus said *"by their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them."* Writing this sermon I could not help but think of that old Christian song – "And They'll Know We Are Christians By Our Love." Please understand Jesus is speaking about our heart and who it belongs to – are you connected to the Vine? This is not about "works" or "salvation

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by works” but instead about “faith.” Is your faith connected to Jesus or to someone or even something else?

Remaining in Him is done through prayer and worship – intimately with Jesus – but it is also about being in Christian community with other believers – or “branches.” We cannot grow and produce fruit alone! Through prayer and worship we will be healthy “branches” connected to the “vine” – Jesus – and together produce good fruit. That is why we do things like Vacation Bible School, to help cultivate young ones and younger ones, and even younger ones, children of all ages – so that they will know we are Christians by our love!