

John 15:1-8

**15** *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

#### A Little Ag(riculture) Lesson

Both my father and his father were citrus growers. Neither had the vast groves seen around here, but each had 10-15 trees which yielded wonderful fresh fruit in its season. As a young child, I remember my grandfather coming over to help my father genetically improve the flavor of his fruit by grafting a branch from one variety of orange trees into a branch of another variety of orange trees. Rarely was I involved in the agricultural endeavors, but they must have included me that day, explaining what a graft was and how a new variety of orange would emerge, because I vividly remember them cutting on the branches and grafting them together. I also remember them explaining what they hoped would happen. They hoped for better fruit.

To graft a tree, you must first choose a healthy 6-inch long branch with leaf buds and cut it from its source of life. Then, choose another branch about ¼-1 inch long on the tree to which you are going to graft. Strip the branch of all growth and begin to cut a "T" into the bark where the leaves had been growing. Insert the bud from the new branch into the "T" and wrap the new branch above and below the cut onto the new source of life. The tree will absorb the new leaf bud as it heals its own cut and by the next year, a new variety of fruit will emerge.

As Frances and Joanne announced to us earlier today, we are kicking off stewardship season today with the theme: Be Alive & Thrive! As a church we want to be citrus trees that are full of new life and sweet fruit. We want to be branches grafted into the vine that is Jesus, rooted in the rich soil of God's love. We want to bear more than the limp fruit that weakly hangs from its branch and when picked is tasteless. We want to bear juicy fruit that bursts forth in full color and rich tastes! As a church, we don't just want to be alive, we want to thrive! We want God to use us to be the desirable fruit. When the world asks: where do I turn when I want to know God? Our hope is to be a tree firmly planted in God's love whose fruit gives others the desire to be grafted into Christ as well.

For the next six weeks, we will concentrate on "growth" texts in the scriptures. We will look at the guidance given to us in God's Word that teaches us how to grow in our faith,

how to bear more fruit, how to deepen our roots that they may touch the Source of Life. And while we will talk about the financial components of stewardship, we will not limit our discussion of stewardship to money, for the stewardship of life involves much more than money.

Today's scripture lesson finishes up a genre of writing the gospel writer uses where he introduces Jesus to his readers by using "I AM" statements. Approximately 1400 years before the gospel writer began to write, Judaism had been introduced to Moses, an Israelite raised in the palace of the Egyptian pharaoh while the other Israelites served as slaves. Moses went for a walk one day, no doubt trying to get away from the palace politics when he came upon a burning bush – a bush that was on fire yet was not singed or scorched. Curious, Moses, a man who had been raised in a culture that believed in multiple gods, in a culture that believed that each pharaoh was a god, . . . Moses approached this burning bush with wonder – perhaps even anticipating a revelation from one of the gods of his Egyptian culture. What he heard, however, changed his life. For as Moses approached the bush, a voice began to talk to him from the fire. The voice identified itself as "I AM" – the One God – and from that point on, Moses was a follower of YHWH, the One God.

The writer of the gospel of John was familiar with the story of Moses. Most likely, he had been raised in the Judaic faith himself, and so when he identified Jesus with "I AM" statement, he was luring his readers into the understanding that Jesus was not your ordinary man; rather, using the words of John's Jewish religion, "*I AM*" was one and the same as Jesus, who had stood before them. I AM the light of the world, John wrote about Jesus. I AM the bread of life. I AM the way. I AM the door. And then, on the night before Jesus dies, John tells us that Jesus proclaims to his followers, "I AM the vine and you are the branches." With the repetitiveness of his writing, John was emphasizing the deity of Jesus, but he finishes this series of statements by giving Jesus' followers an "I AM" of our own, for WE ARE the branches. We are not deity, but we are held on to the Source of Life by that one who John affectionately names "I AM."

If you've ever taken the time to look at a vine, you've discovered that the branches intertwine around each other. Each branch wraps itself around other branches as it grows, not to stifle the life out of the other, but to keep other branches attached to the Source of Life. Today's scripture gives us the beautiful image of Jesus wrapping his life around us so that we can stay attached to the Life Giver, for *those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing*. In citrus-grafting talk, Jesus is the wrap attaching the new cut to the rooted branch. Without that wrap, a new growth would not be possible. For *those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing*.

We call each other into stewardship because we have been blessed abundantly. We have watched as the Spring Lake Presbyterian Church has budded new life, receiving 13 new members into our fellowship this year. We have watched as people from this faith community have offered their time and talents to God in this place and in the world so

that God's love can nourish many and so that others can be rooted to the One Source of all Life. We have welcomed friends into this place – friends with lots of questions and doubts and just as many assurances and beliefs. We have watched as fruit has come forth on this branch of God's church as we have desired to be rooted even more into the giver of Life that is God. We have prayed for one another. We have visited one another. We have served one another. We have reached out to one another. We have asked questions about our faith with one another. We have sought God through the scriptures and held on tightly when life takes challenging turns with one another. But above all, we have recognized that apart from God we would be nothing.

Our stewardship theme this year is a challenge. Be Alive, yes. Bear fruit. But we want to do even more than that! We also want to Thrive!!! We want God to fertilize us, to prune us, to nourish us so that this church can be the best fruit-bearing branch we can be. The vine-grower, that is God, removes all branches that are not bearing fruit. The heavenly Citrus Farmer may strip us of all of our fruit, of all of our leaves, may even cut on us in ways that feel painful in order to graft in us a bud that will help us bear even more fruit, even richer fruit. As we enter stewardship season, we must be willing to say to God: *do what you must for us and for this YOUR church, so that we may bear your fruit for the world.*

Jesus will hold us onto our source of life. As we are nourished with life, as we see that God the Life-Giver is blessing us daily with abundance, we won't be able to help but give back to God.

As your pastor, I challenge you to envision stewardship of all that we have been given as a necessary act of Christian discipleship. As each one of us asks God what is required of us, I hope we will hear and understand that God wants us to hold back nothing. But how do we get to that point? First, this week I hope we will BEGIN by observing the many ways the Life-Giver has blessed us with more abundance than we had ever imagined. (if you would like to share a story of God's blessings, share that in a bulletin over the next 6 weeks?) And second, I hope we will find a way, using what we have been given, to encourage other branches in this church to allow Jesus to wrap his vine around them that they may be firmly attached to the Living God, the Source of all Life and Hope, the one who gives this world a hope and a future.

<sup>6</sup>*Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.* <sup>7</sup>*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* <sup>8</sup>*My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.* What happens when we allow the vine to hold us close to the Source of Life? We will bear much fruit. If we are intertwined with the Source of Life, we become part of God's body and all that we do and say and are will reflect the Life that is God – to the point that if we ask anything it will be done for us! What does a church look like when it is alive in Christ? It is mission-oriented – always asking how we can use what we have been given to proclaim the good news to those outside of our building. It is full of joy – nourished by the Spirit of God

who breathes life into us we can not help but be filled with joy for each penny we have been given, each minute we have been given, each breath we have been given. A church that is alive is growing – because we are rooted in the life of God, we can not help but bear fruit. We can not help but help others bear fruit. Life in Christ is not about ourselves but always about others.

So as we approach stewardship, I do not want us to ask how we can pledge to meet our budget next year. Rather, I want us to ask God what we need to give – financially and in terms of the time and talents that we have been given – to allow the most people to be grafted into the tree of God’s life. I want us to ask God what we need to give to allow the most people to be hugged onto the source of Life by the Vine who is Jesus. I want us to ask God what we need to give to allow this church to bear fruit and to do so abundantly.

(Close: Liz’ response to me.) Like others this year, my financial life has been tight – husband went back to school, etc. - and when things are tight I hold on to what I have – telling myself that I am preparing for the storms that most certainly will come. I was talking with a clergy-friend about this and told her how hard it was to give back to God in times like this. But then she looked me in the eyes and said, “but doesn’t it feel so good to know that you can contribute something?” And I realized she was right. It feels good to let loose of my own hold on what I have. It feels good to trust God to provide for my needs even as I am helping others trust God to be their Source of Life. It feels good to allow Jesus to hold me tightly to the Source of Life even as I proclaim to others that Jesus holds them tightly when they are convinced they do not belong on that tree. It feels good to let go of all that I convince myself is giving me life and to be grafted into God’s life-giving tree.

Above all, stewardship is about allowing God to prune us, to remove us from the hold we have on our own lives so that we can trust God as our Source of Life to be our all in all, to be enough. May God give us the courage to do so. Amen.