

Turn to John 15:1-12. Those who have been with us throughout the Advent season will realize this is a continuation of the series dealing with the “I AMs” that Jesus is recorded as having stated through the Gospel of John as an Advent series. What I thought about when I got back from Minnesota and thawed out, was that John 15 and talking about the vine and the branches and fruitfulness is simply a fantastic way to reflect on who we are, who God is, the relationship between us and what we anticipate in the year to come. That is what my motivation is in continuing the series beyond the Advent season itself. So join me if you have your Bibles open to John 15:1-12. Jesus said (15:1),

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. (15:2) Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. (15:3) Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. (15:4) Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. (15:5) I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. (15:6) If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers, and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. (15:7) If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. (15:8) By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. (15:9) As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. (15:10) If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. (15:11) These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. (15:12) This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.*

As we take up this extended metaphor – that is the proper term – there are two things I would like to accomplish: one is simply to remind ourselves of what Jesus said. The other is to figure out how this applies to us.

Right off, thinking about that two things are fairly clear just as a general overview and impression gathered up from the entire twelve verses. That is that there are two things God expects from us and they are interlocking. One is that He expects for us to be very fruitful. [Second] is that He expects that fruit is going to be the consequence of our loving one another. When it comes to this matter of love, the model of Jesus Christ is absolutely perfectly clear. In order to manifest the love of God for us, what did He do? He left His Father’s side and He came down and He entered into our – we often say our “condition”. But what He really did is He entered into our fellowship. He came along side of us; He became one of us. He joined into the life that we live. There are no solo Christians. You cannot thrive apart from the Body. So as you anticipate the year to come, you have to ask yourself, “How am I functioning as a part of the Body of Christ, one of the branches of the vine tied in to those who gather to worship the Lord?”

It is always interesting: I love being a pastor primarily because I love studying the word and being constantly surprised by what I hadn’t noticed the last time around. When you look at this passage, “Jesus says ‘I am the true vine and My Father is the vinedresser. . .’ [Jesus] talks to people in the ancient people who know all about growing grapes. There are a number of things that it would be wise for us to remember. You didn’t plant grapes because they were pretty. You planted grapes so they would produce. That is why you planted the vines, that is why you planted the vineyard, that is why you expended the effort. It was not so people could pass by and say, “Whoa, what a good looking field!” It was so you could say to the Father, “Wow, what a productive field!” That, of course, is why the Father prunes. He prunes, as Jesus says, explicitly in order that each pruned branch will bear more.

So we could reasonably think to ourselves, “How productive was I last year? To what degree or extent did I manifest the fruit of the Spirit in my life?” That becomes a baseline for progress if I understand the [passage] correctly. The Father has planted Jesus in the world and believers are branches which draw their life from Jesus. I

think the most commonly understood aspect of the metaphor is that Jesus is the necessary source of life for us. To survive as a Christian you have to draw your spiritual life directly from Jesus Christ.

How does that happen? Initially you have to be grafted into the vine. We have already talked about that on a number of different occasions; you can hardly avoid talking about that when you are taking communion together [as we have this morning]. We have to believe in Jesus Christ; we have to believe not only that He is the Son of God, we have to believe that He died for our sins. We have to believe not only that He died for our sins, but for my sins. Consequently we have to have an understand of the holiness of God and how deeply God Himself is offended when we sin. Consequently part of what it means to be grafted into the vine is that we are committed to pursuing a life of holiness. Here is, of course, where true biblical Christianity parts ways with the vast majority of American Christians today. There is no comprehension of holiness, being separated and consecrated, separated from the world and consecrated to God. But that is exactly what is being talked about in this passage: pursuing a life of holiness and devotion to the will and purposes of God.

How do we do that? Put it this way: what do we imagine the sap is? We have a picture here of the vine and the branches; and we know that the branches live off of the vine because the sap, the living “blood” if you will: what do we imagine it is that is the flow channel? I think beloved that it is prayer. Why do I say that? Listen, any fool can read the Bible. Any atheist and lots of atheists do in order to find reasons to make fun of the Bible. The Bible remains a closed book until you come armed, submitted and filled with the Spirit of God, asking Him, “Please, I can open the page, but only You can open my heart to receive the message.” So the sap that supplies food to the branch from the vine is prayer. There is a lot of ways in which that prayer shows up: reading the word in prayer; also of course worshiping together with the body. What a difference it makes to arrive, not hoping something good will happen because I am tired and crabby – I am referring mostly to converted Baptists! – How do we plan to arrive here? Because part as well of the way in which the sap from the vine comes into us is not just by gathering together in a large assembly. Many know you can come, smile and go away and nothing happens. We know that, we can do that, I have done that. But there is another level upon which there is the active presence and work of the Holy Spirit bringing the sap, the living truth of God, through the vine, that is Jesus Christ, into our lives, and that is the conversation we have with one another.

What should those conversations be like? What we are told in 2 Timothy 3:16-17, what we are told about the Word of God is that it is inspired and it is capable, it is designed to teach us truth, to rebuke error in our lives, to correct our wrong thinking and to train us in righteousness, which is faith. That is what our conversation with one another should be doing. I had occasion to talk to one of my sons, having the privilege of being in Minnesota and visiting with all five of our children and that was a blessing. I said, “This is my observation!” No, I made this to Joe Cagnacci the amazing! I said, You know I have noticed that if I don’t talk about sports, most men have nothing to talk about with me at all. Now just think about that. Get five Christian men together and tell them you can’t talk about sports. Talk about Jesus. Talk about your faith. Talk about obedience. Talk about service. Talk about your struggle with sin. Talk about your hopes or the Spirit’s work in the lives of your family. Talk.

You see, the sap has to flow. The Spirit has to have liberty to work. Consequently, we must be yielded to what the Spirit wants to do, because if we aren’t there is no fruit, and what does the Father do with fruitless branches? Have you ever thought about that? Have we ever thought about that process? Jesus says the branch withers and then it is burned. Have you known people like that: active for a while in the church and then they begin to fade away. Did you think that was just their behavior? Did we ever consider that was God’s [action], saying “Useless, occupying space and time to no fruit!” One of the things you have to recognize when you look at this passage, notice again that when Jesus says, “You need to understand the pattern here: I love you the way the Father loves me. I love the Father the way the Father loves me.” You and I need to understand that the Father Who prunes us loves Jesus more than He loves us. And Jesus loves the Father more than He loves us. We have got this idea that we are so

magnificent and that God is so lucky to have us as His children. That is not true. It is His grace, it is His unmerited favor, it is His love extended to us for no reason about us but entirely out of Himself. When He takes hold of us in His hand and He says, “I want you to produce fruit” why? So we will be big fruit-bearers? No, it is so that His Son will be glorified. Our redemption is about the glorification of Jesus Christ! That is why we are to produce fruit; that is why our lives are to be progressively transformed so that they become an image and a model and a reflection of Jesus. But silent lips and hardened hearts bear no fruit for the Lord’s glory. When the Father begins walking up and down the vine rows, He looks for fruit, and we should be conscious of that.

*“According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it. For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with precious stones, gold or silver, wood, hay or straw, each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work anyone has done. If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”* (1 Corinthians 3:10-15) Fruitless branches do not have a happy prospect. How then do we approach this question of bearing fruit? This is what we read in Colossians 3:12-16, *“Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body, and be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.”*

Skip down to the end, to the last two slides. What I want us to think about is this whole question of fruitfulness and whether or not we are fruitful. The great emphasis in this passage on bearing fruit actually comes to focus in our love for one another. You will notice how strongly Jesus emphasizes: love one another. Love is the fulfillment of My commandments. What we need to think about at the end is some questions that we want to reflect upon. The basic question which I would ask you to write down is, “How fruitful am I for Jesus and the Father? Where do I stand? If the Father were to come to day and “harvest” your life, which is what he did with [our recently deceased sister in the Lord], what kind of fruit basket would you fill? There are other questions that come after that. We have a number of wonderful examples in our congregation of remarkable fruitfulness: Ian Carlisle believes that he will bear fruit for God’s glory through the prison ministry. That is not the only way, but certainly that is an important way, that as he gives his life in service that the fruitfulness, the character of Christ will begin to blossom and grow in him and there will be this rich harvest. Ken Butler believes that this will occur through the Mexico Mission trips, and I can attest to that. The work that he does himself, and the work that he does with those young people, and the work that happens in their lives and the fruitfulness of God’s character being built into them, the testimony in the community around about: what a harvest! What a big basket is filled!

Kari Walden is suffering grief today [for the loss of her dear friend] as we would expect her to do: Kari Walden believes that this will occur through the music ministry. If you listened today to that short announcement that was given today that she is laboring to multiply the avenues through which we as a body of believers can give praise and glory to God, working with one another singing and playing instruments and making all manner of magnificent things! She believes; it is not just that she will release voices to sing, and instruments, but when you work side by side, when you labor together in order to have something great happen, the character of Christ, the purposes of God are fulfilled and the fruitfulness of the lives increase. What about you? I also have my wife as an example, but I don’t want to take 45 minutes in which to explain the wonderful ways in which that occurs.

We are going to have a leadership meeting in a couple of weeks on a Saturday, and this is the question we have to ask: are the ministries to which we are currently committed as a church ministries which we are convinced will bear abundant fruit for God’s glory? Churches have a tremendous tendency simply to do next year what they did last year, they just keep on and on, and never stepping back and saying to themselves, “Is what we are doing worth the time and effort it takes for doing it? How is this ministry producing fruit for God?” Are there ministries we should drop? Are there ministries we should add? Are we getting things done? Are there other things we need to do? I was hugely encouraged by a brief conversation I had with an anonymous person: don’t even try to think who it was! So often when the pastor leaves town [terrible things happen]? This time something different happened. I found out that a group of men in the congregation stepped up and performed marvelous acts of charitable goodness to help somebody out like that. One of the people who is going to be helped out is a man who has long resisted anybody offering any assistance whatsoever. I would go away next week just so I can come back and hear another report like that. That is good news.

When the Lord opens doors for us to be able to walk into somebody’s life and say, “Here for the love of God is something we are going to do for you” that is good news. And the more good we can do in our community, the more good news there is for us to be glad about, and the greater is the harvest, the richer is the flow, the more abundant in fact the harvest of God’s fruitfulness in our lives, and that is what we desire.

Are we asking the Spirit and are we obeying what He says to us. That is what this passage is about. “*If anyone does not abide in me,*” Jesus says, “*he is thrown away like a branch and withers. . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*”

Please pray with me: Our gracious heavenly Father there stands before us a year, a somewhat arbitrary division of time, particularly for You existing in eternity. Yet Father these concrete stages are important as You care for Your children. We live within the context of space and time. We have only so much time already allotted to us by You, Father, before the first of our days began. So too, Father, you have already prepared for us the good works to walk in. Those good works, Father, as we serve others in the name of Christ and relying upon the Word and the Spirit, those good works bring glory to Your Name, for they render us fruitful for the kingdom. O that others might see Christ in us, and that Christ might accomplish good thing through us in the world around us, that Your praise will increase always. These things we pray, our Father, in Jesus’ name. Amen.