

Sermon for November 20, 2005:

This morning we are concluding our study of the second lifeshape, taken from this book by Mike Breen called **The Passionate Church**. Two weeks ago I was talking about the balance we are invited to cultivate between rest and work as I presented the picture of the pendulum of a clock to show how there is to be a rhythm in our lives between rest and work. I presented to you the idea that we are to "work from our rest, not "rest from our work." By this phrase I wanted to convey the idea that it is as we find our centre by resting in Jesus Christ that we can then cultivate a way of working that sees us moving according to the rhythm that God our Father intended. This is a rhythm that God has woven into the fabric of creation, as Genesis one aptly shows us.

This morning I want to further develop this shape by referring to the passage we just read from John 15.

You will notice here that the pendulum has been modified from the image I showed you a minute ago. At one end of the pendulum's arc is fruitfulness, at the other end is abiding. We can't have one without the other. What I hope to teach you this morning is that the fruitfulness Jesus is speaking of here is the cultivation of a Christ-like character. We are able to cultivate this character as our sense of being is rooted in Christ. This is something that happens progressively and in stages as Jesus' teaching in John 15 so clearly illustrates.

As He did so often throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus once again used whatever was at hand to illustrate the truths He wanted to instill in His followers. As Jesus and His disciples walked together from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemene they would have passed vineyards on their walk, made visible in the light of the full Passover Moon. These vineyards became the basis for some of His most profound and important teaching--the discourse known as "The Vine and the Branches."

Although John doesn't specifically say so, I imagine that Jesus probably picked up a length of vine in His hands as He said these words.

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he

prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you

Notice that the Father not only prunes the unproductive branches off the vine, He also trims the productive branches so they will be even more productive. "Every branch that does bear fruit," says Jesus, "he trims clean so that it will be even more fruitful."

As we think about what Jesus means when he says we are to bear much fruit, we soon realize that this is the theme central to this Gospel. In chapter 1 at verses 12 and 13 we read these words:

¹² But whoever did want him, who believed he was who he claimed and would do what he said, He made to be their true selves, their child-of-God selves. ¹³ These are the God-begotten, not blood-begotten, not flesh-begotten, not sex-begotten.

Over in chapter eight Jesus says:

"If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

And at the end of the Gospel John tells us why he wrote it when in chapter 20:30 and 31 he tells us:

³⁰ Jesus did many other miraculous signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. ³¹ But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.

To bear fruit in the way Jesus is speaking of here means that we are becoming our true Child of God selves. We are becoming what God, our creator intended us to be from the beginning. To be fruitful means to have life in the name of Jesus. As we grow in knowing this there is a freedom that is life giving. As we are abiding in Him, his life is flowing into our life. And it is this truth that allows us to know the joy of John 15:11 where Jesus says: I have told you these things so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." This is the joy known to those who understand that God is at

work in our lives enabling us to become truly fruitful. To become all that God wants us to be.

But the question I have reflecting on this week is why is it that we often find it a challenge to live in the place where our true child of God selves is finding expression? Or to put it negatively, why can we often feel that we are not bearing fruit?

Well, lets think of the vineyard for a minute. I read in my study this week that those who tend vineyards have a work of pruning they need to do at certain times of the year. Vinekeepers cut off "sucker shoots" from the vines. Sucker shoots are branch-like canes of vine which do not bear fruit. Suckers produce many leaves but no fruit. If allowed to remain, suckers sap the life of the vine and reduce the amount of water and nutrient that reaches the fruit. The goal of pruning vines is to direct as much water and nutrient to the fruit as possible, to increase the quality and quantity of fruit.

For some of us we find ourselves in environments where we are surrounded by sucker shoots.

It may be that we are working in an office that has interpersonal dynamics akin to sucker shoots. You are someone who is alive in Christ, but day by day you find yourself in a work environment that drains you.

Or it may be that you are in a home environment that is like suckershoots. You are the only Christian in you family. Your spouse is either an indifferent unbeliever or actually hostile toward you and the Lord.

St. Paul aptly describes what happens when sucker shoots are able to drain the life out of our lives or out of communities when he says in Galatians:

¹⁹ It is obvious what kind of life develops when sucker shoots are allowed to drain the Christ life out of us: repetitive, loveless, cheap sex; a stinking accumulation of mental and emotional garbage; frenzied and joyless grabs for happiness; ²⁰ trinket gods; magic-show religion; paranoid loneliness; cutthroat competition; all-consuming-yet-never-satisfied wants; a brutal temper; an impotence to love or be loved; divided homes and divided lives; small-minded and lopsided pursuits; ²¹ the vicious habit of depersonalizing

everyone into a rival; uncontrolled and uncontrollable addictions; ugly parodies of community. I could go on.

If you are wondering why you sometimes are questioning your fruitfulness, remember that it may be because your environment is working against the work the Spirit of God is wanting to do in you. Or it may be that there are areas in your past that have are in need of pruning.

Now because you find yourself in a work or home environment that is hostile or there is other pruning to be done, this doesn't mean you need to throw up your hands in defeat. But it does mean that we need to be attentive to those influences that are like sucker shoots and ask the Lord to prune them appropriately.

This is so important because we are all faced with the fact that we are either being shaped by God to live as our true child of God selves, or we are living out of our false self. The false self takes prominence when the sucker shoots are not be attended to and the Christ life is being drained from us. The true self is able to take shape as the sucker shoots are being pruned so that the Christ life is able to flow in and through us.

Let me explain what I am trying to get at by fleshing out one of the words Jesus uses in four and five.

"4 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. 5"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."

You will notice that in these two verses Jesus six times uses the words "stay joined to." To stay joined to Jesus means we are to rest in him, or to use a more old fashioned word we are to abide in him. It is out of this place of abiding in Jesus that he says we will be fruitful.

When we hear language like this it brings to mind that we are not human doings but human beings. Our sense of worth and identity is to come from our primary relationship which is with Jesus. To remain in Jesus means "to

be" in Him. Our life flows from him. As we abide, we bear fruit, as he prunes us we are able to be ever more fruitful.

But to live this way is a great challenge because of the sucker shoots and because of what we have so often learned from a young age.

If remaining in Jesus has to do with our beingness I want to suggest that as we more fully know what it is to abide in him we will have a deeper and deeper sense of well being. If however our lives are marked by feeling cut off from Jesus rather than a sense of well being, we will experience more and more a sense of dis-ease.

Let me illustrate this in the following way. The Bible says that we are fearfully and wonderfully made. The person who wrote these words was David, and he then goes on to say that I know this full well.

Here is the verse from psalm 139:

"I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made;" (Objective Truth)

"your works are wonderful, I know that full well." (Subjective/Existential knowing)

Now it is one thing to hear the objective truth that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. It is another thing to know this subjectively. That is, to know this truth in my own being.

Let me use my self as an example. It has always been true that I am fearfully and wonderfully made. This is because this is God's truth. But for many years I did not know this truth. I thought I was worthless. I lived out this belief by having a continual experience of dis-ease. This manifested itself physically. More often than not my hands would be cold and clammy, I would often feel deeply insecure and I had canker sores in my mouth much of the time because I was so stressed out. I would try to comfort myself with various types of addictive behaviours that were forms of self soothing. They would make me feel better for a time but they never worked. I would continue to live with this experience of dis-ease at the core of my being.

However, as I have come more fully to know in the core of my being, at a subjective level that I Am fearfully and wonderfully, I know more of the joy Jesus is speaking of in verse 11. I am learning to know in my very being that I am a child of the Father, being redeemed by Jesus as I am fashioned into his likeness. So there is an integration of the objective truth that I am fearfully and wonderfully made with the subjective knowing of this truth at the core of my being.

When I am able to live from this place I can understand what it means to be a human being. If however I am living from the place of dis-ease I find my identity as a human doing. I buy into the lie that I have to earn my sense of worth because I believe that at the core I have no intrinsic worth or value and therefore I strive to establish a sense of identity.

So here is the challenge. We are to abide, remain in Jesus. But every day we experience life that either supports or enhances our sense of our true self or we have experiences that distort that true self and feed into the false self.

It is important to mention that Jesus was teaching the disciples to remain in Him at the height of the conflict that was before both our Lord and his original followers. They were going to face the onslaught of forces that would call into question all Jesus was teaching them here. His right "to be" and that of his followers would be called into question by the religious and political authorities.

Think of Peter in the outer garden as Jesus is questioned by the authorities. When challenged by the other bystanders as having been with Jesus three times he vehemently denies having known in and in so doing denies his own sense of being. As the gospel writers tell us this leads to a crisis for Peter and he breaks down and weeps because he cannot at this time face the barrage of attitudes that challenge and mock him. He is not yet secure in his core identity as being in Jesus. But as we continue to read the Gospel and the rest of the New Testament we know that this will come.

But as we think of Peter's challenge I recognize that it is in the same way that it is hard for people to remain in Jesus There are people whose beings are being shamed, People who have been told through words and actions that

they do not have the right to be. They have been told that their being is an imposition. This is psychological shame. I think this may be in part what Peter was facing in the garden that night.

For such people there is a need of healing at the very core of their identity and existence. This is called inner healing. It is a work that God begins when we are able to receive the truth about how God loves and values us. Such a movement of the Holy Spirit needs to be tended to carefully. This is because all too easily these fragile shoots can be abruptly damaged if exposed to those forces that shame us and deny God's truth.

We are created in such a way that we make bonds with others, just as the branches of the vine are bonded to others. If we are exposed to words and actions that ridicule and diminish us and are not rooted in Jesus we can believe them. This creates a negative sense of self worth and we can become bonded to those sucker branches I mentioned earlier.

Let's think about it like this.

We are born into the arms of another and then we bond with mom and dad in a physical way. Bonding is the foundation of trust. Some bond well, because they are loved and cherished. There are those who have not known this and can have a hard time with intimacy. Through bonding we begin to sense who we are from the outside in. Depending on the kinds of bonds the are being created this will allow us to grow into our true or false selves. If there is a trust fracture it takes time to rebuild this. There is healing that will be needed just as there would be in a branch that was damaged.

When we are growing in Christ it is God's intention that we are learning what it is to have healthy bonds in our relationships. As this happens than we are more and more able to live out of our true self and the fruit of the Spirit is able to grow in an environment that is healthy. But because we at times all live not out of our true self but our false self we need to be able to talk with one another about when we have been hurt and wounded. When we do this kind of confessing the Father is able to prune those branches that are not bearing fruit so they do not become suckers. If we hold on to these hurts they can turn into resentments that damage the life of Christ in us both individually and corporately.

As this kind of bonding happens we are then able to cultivate a deeper sense of belonging. We belong to a larger group. We have other people who give us a sense of our true self and our place. When we have good images of what it means to be a woman man we have a true image when we get poor images it affects us negatively. What messages do we get when we belong. If we have good sense of connection we can enter into life. Those who don't have a good sense of connection, can feel like we are spectators,

BLESSING:

Blessings comes through the spoken word and appropriate touch.

If we are blessed our true sense of self can flourish. A blessing is something that affirms and confirms us in the world If we do not have a good sense of self and if I don't have sense of belonging I become a doer to earn my place of belong and we can never receive it when others bless us. However we can readily take to heart those who speak words that curse and diminish us.

BELIEVING: We have a sense of family and that life is good. If things are safe and healthy we have a sense of belonging. If I have been loved and touched by someone with skin on I can believe in the love I cannot touch. God works through people, places and events. If we can believe that authority is good we can believe in self, God and human kind.

BALANCE: This is hard to do. There is a time for everything: Love your God with all heart soul, mind and strength and love neighbour as yourself. Love God, love self, spouse, family, ministry

As we learn to more fully live with these b words shaping our lives then in turn we will both grow in abiding in Christ and in learning to work from our rest.