

Wicker Park Lutheran Church

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Today's gospel reading is from John. As a gospel, John is deceptively difficult to read. It's complex, filled with deep theology, and possesses a high Christology. It's a gospel where the shorter readings in our lectionary often make it *more* confusing. In today's gospel, we heard the circularity in the text that is emblematic of John. You see, John's gospel is summed up like this: If you want to love God, love Jesus. If you want to love Jesus, love each other. Love one another by abiding in Jesus. And in abiding in Jesus, you will dwell with God. There it is – John's gospel. At its root, it is love, and that's deceptively easy. Because the real rubber-hits-the-road situation comes when we imagine what love truly looks like.

This is where the vine and the branches come into play. This pseudo-parable is a well-known gospel text. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and God is the vine grower. Most sermons focus on our actions to remain close to Jesus. In an Evangelical setting a preacher might say: *you* need to work to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ or you're going to be thrown in the fire. In Lutheran settings a preacher might say: that God is so close to us that we are connected, like a vine, with God and that we have the opportunity to bear fruit by sharing God's connection and love. In other words, we focus on the relationship that *God* has already created with us and how that transforms us to be bearers of abundant fruit.

Let me put this another way. In our lives we can easily spend much of our time focusing on deficits. We are told by advertisers, salespeople, and capitalism that we are deformed. We think that we're not skinny enough or not attractive enough. We are tricked into thinking that we're not young enough or not old enough. In today's gospel, that way of thinking is a withered shoot of the vine, because a scarcity mindset will not produce fruit. And so, every time we gather in this place, every time we come to the table with abundance of bread and wine, and every time that God's word reminds us that there is enough, that is God's pruning. God is pruning from us a scarcity mindset that limits our love. This place is a space of pruning off that which will not bear life. The life-less limbs that grow among the deceptions of the world are pruned in this place, so that we can bear the fruit of love. Does that make sense?

If that doesn't track, then think about how often we feel like we need to earn love and acceptance. In this place, we are reminded that God first loved us, and that God welcomes us with open arms in baptism. As water was sprinkled on us today, we were reminded of our baptism where it was God's action and an assurance of God's love. So when we start growing into the belief that we are unlovable and need to work for God's love. That false understanding is pruned from us as the water splashes on our bodies. That bold faced lie is drowned in the waters of baptism so that we might emerge stronger, nourished, and ready to grow in following Christ path to life.

And, that's what is so interesting about today's gospel. If you listen closely, we find that everyone, no matter what, is pruned by God. Those negative beliefs, thoughts, and ideologies are what lead to a fruitless vine. But, God's

pruning makes us healthy. However, even if we already produce fruit, even if we are filled with the truth of God's love and grace, it is here that we are pruned yet again. That we are reminded of what the world tries to trick us so that we might produce more fruit.

And it's no accident that Jesus used the image of fruit. After all, the purpose of plants bearing fruit is so that it can be consumed by animals. In that consumption seeds go flying as an animal eats like a toddler, or seeds get transplanted to other locations after a gastric journey. This fruit that has grown seems to have come to an end with the animal's feast. Yet, the seeds fallen have the chance to produce another vine. A vine that will grow and spread. A vine that will be pruned to bear more fruit. In turn, which will be spread yet again.

In this final month of our sermon series focused on how God creates "a place" for us, and how we might make this a better place to welcome all people through our capital campaign, I cannot help but think about the ways our community produces fruit by sharing our space, by helping those on the margins see God's love and affirmation, and by welcoming a refugee family here to Chicago. Some might say that we have going here is already growing, it's already working good enough, so why spend all the time, money, and resources on a capital campaign to make the building ADA accessible? Well, today's gospel reminds us that we as individuals and as a faith community are continually pruned by our God whether we bear fruit or not. We recall that we have an abundance to share with our neighbor. We remember that this place has transformed us and that we want to share that with even more people. You see, this campaign is about so much more than an

elevator and a bathroom refresh. This campaign is about seeing God's vision and then leaning into the gifts of bearing even more fruit as we follow the way of Christ.

So on this day, my friends. Remember that you are loved, that you are enough, and that God is with you. So too, remember that to love more freely we need to be pruned with the reality of how much we have and how much we've received from our God. It is with this holy pruning, then, that we might bear even more fruit so that an abundance of life might be found in this and every place. Amen.