

May 10, 2009
John 15:1-11
First Parish UCC, Brunswick
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Fruit of the Vine

One of the things I love about this time of year is forsythia. Its blossoms joyously announce spring in a region where the biggest sign of spring is generally mud. Last weekend Gerry Orem gave me some forsythia branches, which I've been enjoying on the table all week. Yesterday, I did what she suggested and stuck several branches in a cluster in the ground where I hope they will take root and blossom in years to come.

This is the time of year when people come back into direct contact with the soil. We clear our yards and prepare our gardens. We notice the fresh young shoots of plants, the colorful spring blossoms, and at the same time we feel our own souls refreshed. I read an article recently about a study that affirmed a direct correlation between physical interaction with soil and a lifting of the human spirit. I suspect many of you already know that. It's a good time for the gardening image of the vine and branches in today's gospel.

John's gospel includes many "I am..." images for Jesus, including I am the good shepherd, the bread of life, the light of the world, the way, the truth, the life, living water. These are all images embedded in the ordinary, earthly life we share. They are not complex theological terms. They are simple and yet as with all metaphors they draw us into layers and layers of reflection and contemplation. In today's passage, Jesus says, "I am the vine and you are the branches." Here are three reflections about this image I'm going to comment on today.

- Branches are bound together by the vine.
- Branches need to be pruned.
- Branches are meant to bear fruit.

Branches are bound together by the vine. On trees, branches are more vulnerable than on a vine. They are less intertwined. They stand out alone. A lot of branches in our yard didn't make it through the storms of winter this year. They snapped and broke. On a vine, however, the branches are so intertwined that it's often hard to distinguish one from another. They strengthen one another, which anyone who has tried to clear out ivy or other kinds of vine knows.

To be deeply rooted in Christ's vine, we are not meant to go it alone. We often try, but like branches it is easy to snap and break when we are standing alone in the storms that come our way. We need each other to practice faith together, to support one another in difficult times and to rejoice with each other in celebratory times. Sometimes it's not easy to be part of church life, because church is full of real human beings instead of idealized Christians. People are often frustrated with the church because it is full of hypocrites. Of course it is, but there is always room for more.

In spite of our foibles, I was recently reminded of the life and faith-sustaining character of community when during a visit with a church member he told me how deeply touched, and honestly, somewhat surprised, he has been by all the prayers, cards, emails, and other

messages of support you have sent to him as he struggles with illness. It warmed my heart to hear him express such appreciation for our life together. It matters when we practice kindness.

The second comment I want to make about branches today doesn't feel like it has much to do with kindness, at least not at the time. And that is Branches need to be pruned. Without judicious pruning, branches don't bear much fruit.

The Greek word for pruning at its root also means cleansing. Spring is a time for pruning and cleaning. When it comes to spring cleaning, my mother always says, "Don't bother with such cleaning unless you are in a good throwing away mood. Otherwise you just rearrange the stuff." In other words, you better be ready to prune. That advice is probably good for our spiritual lives and our church lives as well.

I remember a difficult time in my life, when even though I thought I was working on things; in fact I was just rearranging my inner stuff. As I was grappling to come to a deeper understanding of my spirit, someone said to me, "Some day you will see this as a gift." To be honest, at that moment, I felt like pruning that person's tongue. The experience didn't feel anything like a gift. In retrospect, today's imagery is helpful. I would say that it was a pruning time in my life. It was a necessary pruning that has allowed me to be more fruitful in my faith journey.

In church life, the "stuff" we are tempted to simply rearrange is often embedded in the phrase, "We've always done it that way." Here at First Parish, we are blessed

with an almost three hundred year history. Part of the richness of that tradition, when you actually study it, includes change - the necessary, and sometimes painful, changes that the congregation has made over the centuries in its physical, spiritual, and mission life together.

One of the 'prunings' I have observed in recent years (that I hope we will continue to be open to) is that God's Spirit has been pruning away our reticence to talk and pray together about matters that are often difficult to discuss. For example, we had a Windows on War series even though we do not speak with one voice on this matter. We know we have deeply held differences of opinion about faithful response in the face of human conflict. But the matters of everyday life in the world are matters of faith, and matters of faith influence our everyday lives. True diversity and the practice of discernment means we are called to take the time to listen carefully and thoughtfully to one another.

Another topic that is before us just this week as a culture and as a church is the Marriage Equality Law the governor of Maine signed this past week. This action is in dialogue with our statement at the beginning of the bulletin - *We are a congregation diverse in economic status, ethnic origin, mental and physical challenges, religious tradition, sexual orientation, and many other ways. We affirm that the love of Christ for each person knows no bounds.* I hope we will continue to have conversations about this topic in the weeks ahead. It matters when we seek justice.

The point of pruning is that Branches are meant to bear fruit.

As a popular song says, “They will know we are Christians by our love.” They will know us by the fruit we bear.

A few weeks ago, as I got into the car and turned on NPR, I caught the end of a collection of quotes from people who had done “This I Believe” essays. The one that caught my ear and has stayed with me ever since was the woman who said something like this, “I pay attention to how I act, because it tells me what I actually believe.” It was a twist on the old adage “actions speak louder than words.” She’s saying that how we act tells us what we actually believe, regardless of what our tongues say we believe. This is often a humbling experience.

We tend to speak of belief and faith as if they are ideas to which we give assent. However, belief and faith at their roots are about our whole person – our minds and our actions. It is about where our trust, where our very lives are rooted.

So, what does the way we spend our time together as a church tell us about what we actually believe, where our trust is, where our lives are rooted? The way we spend our time in committees and small groups, the way we expend ourselves in ministry and mission, the way we spend our money, what do all these tell us about what we actually believe?

Such reflections call us to walk humbly with our God, so that we might actually walk our talk.

Five years ago you called me as Associate Pastor to be a pastor and teacher in the life of this congregation. Over these years we have been bound together, we have experienced change,

we have born good fruit in our commitment to be witnesses to the way of Christ here in Mid Coast Maine. I am honored by the Search Committee’s recommendation that we continue together on this journey of faith and ministry.

Three things I was told about this congregation before I met you were -

- We value being a teaching and learning community for all ages.
- We are involved in the wider community addressing social needs and concerns.
- Worship is vital to our life together, with particular richness in music ministry.

This congregation has born good fruit over the generations and I trust and pray that we will continue to do so.

I hope we will continue to expand our educational ministry, including interfaith dialogue, seeking ways to create a safe space for those in the wider community who are uneasy about entering a church but who are spiritual seekers.

I hope we will continue to identify needs in the wider community and work with others to address those needs. I hope we will also look at systemic realities that perpetuate entrenched social problems

I hope in our worship life we will engage our tradition in dialogue with our contemporary culture,
following in the way of Jesus,
celebrating God’s presence in our lives
and trusting that the Spirit will help us to
Seek justice
Love Kindness
And walk humbly with our God.