

God of all beginnings, you bring a new day, and you promise to journey with each of us through the hours.

I thank you for the breath and strength I have for you are my vine; only in you am I strong enough to face the difficulty of this world. I lean on you so that I may use my gifts wisely and with compassion toward everyone I meet.

Let any questions today be a form of pruning to bring forth in us new understandings, healing, and good fruit; in Jesus' name. Amen.

Grace and Peace be with you, dear Friends! Let the people shout the good news: Alleluia! Christ is risen! Christ is Risen Indeed! Alleluia!

I will confess to you up front... these first verses of John 15 are at the core of how I understand my call, have given me strength, and define my approach to learning & teaching in life and ministry.

Vines and branches were very familiar to the 1st century people in the Palestine region. I don't know if you've had the opportunity to experience the work necessary in a vineyard, but many people of the day worked in vineyards. Their backs got tired from the picking and the hauling of grapes to market. The presses required much labor too, whether with hands and feet, or guiding the donkey. The people of the day were very familiar with the Torah imagery of Israel as vineyard from Isaiah... one which dried up (5:1-7) and one which produced much good fruit (27:2-6).

It should come as no surprise that Jesus re-presents this imagery for the disciples and for us. Jesus' audience knew all about pruning and growth. Pruning is necessary to remove the 'old' growth and to promote new growth. Pruning might be better understood these days as de-fragmenting your computer. The process condenses the bits, trashes the strays and straggling bits, aligns the essential saved bits so that there is room for new bits to be processed and stored. Another way of thinking of pruning is cleaning out your clothes closet... sorting, repurposing and giving away the worn, outsized and overflowing items so that everything has a place and there's room for a few new items.

And pruning is not pain free or easy. Sometimes we are very attached and comfortable with the way things are or ways of doing things. To change anything is hard. But the truth of the matter is, change, pruning is necessary for life.

John's epistle reminds us that love of neighbor is the chief fruit expected from the vine. For John, the fruit of loving one's neighbor is a test, a goal, an expectation, and a reminder of our calling...our mission.

These readings today help us to remember that believing and loving one's neighbor are part of the same truth...to believe is to love, and to love is to believe.

We heard it read, 'let's love each other, because love is from God, and everyone who loves is born from God and knows God' (1John4:7). We may think of it as whoever is born of God will love...but believing (being born of God) and loving neighbor cannot be separated...not first or second. Loving neighbor is a sign (fruit) that God's Spirit dwells/abides in our lives.

Back to this parable...Jesus is the vine and God the Vinegrower and we are the branches. So what does it mean that pruning is needed to produce good fruit? Is this a warning or a promise?

I believe it is a necessary requirement of our spiritual lives...that we remain in the Vine, to receive nourishment, equipping and sustenance...able to grow in knowledge, wisdom and love. I hear this imagery as learning from difficulties so that I am prepared for the next act of serving. How do you hear this?

There is another phrase that makes me ask questions...“apart from me, you can do nothing” (15:5b). Day to day, most of us don't act like everything we do and are and accomplish depends on God. I think this verse challenges our sense of being self-made men and women in the world. David Lose, my favorite Lutheran theologian, puts it this way, *‘after a year of pandemic and racial reckoning and political paralysis, maybe this is the year we can hear this as an affirmation more accurately and with fresh appreciation. It initially sounds like a warning, or even a scolding, yet*

embedded in these words is a promise...everything we do depends on Jesus that we can count on doing something meaningful'. Let's remember, it's not up to us. Jesus is at the center of it all! Nothing else matters! Everything is centers on Jesus.

Which, lastly, and most importantly, is what I take as a huge affirmation ... the dependence of branches on the vine and the great potential of being a branch on the vine. The imagery can be heard in the verses of a song written by Israel Houghton, Adam Ranney and Micah Massey. *Jesus at the center of it all (2x) from beginning to the end it will always be, it's always been you Jesus.*

When this pandemic started and the Saint James faithful had to pivot, shift, and adapt our ministries and our worship, this scripture text became the center of my strength and source of energy. *Jesus at the center of my life (2x) from beginning to the end it will always be, it's always been you Jesus.*

The Caring Ministry became, in name and in function, the Vine and Branches Ministry. The fruit of this ministry was two-fold... 1) pruning and adding to the church directory with folks who had relocated & changed contact info, and 2) adding to the number of branches/people who were willing to reach out and have conversation with others by phone. This met a need for some of our extroverted folks, and even helped a few introverted people appreciate connection.

Our mission of supporting those with food insecurity grew as we defined a need and many faithful responded with needed items and donations earmarked specifically for the food bank. Just this month we began collecting and collaborating with our neighbor church in Glenelg to support weekend food needs for two schools. Even with the challenges of a pandemic, our ministries and mission has kept loving and serving God and Neighbors as our focus... Jesus at the center of it all.

Here's the thing, friends... we are still in need of pruning... of growing...of bearing fruit in mission, keeping Jesus at the Center of this church. We must prune away the old ways of doing ministries and adapt to using new methods to meet the needs of our neighbors.

We added the parking lot conversations to meet needs of people suffering with isolation, which we adapted as the weather got cold. We are adapting again as warmer weather is here again, and as masking requirements change as well.

We began using FreeConference Call.com to support fellowship on Sundays and for Monday morning boosts. We continue to use this tool for our Thursday Morning Bible Study (starting a new book in two weeks!)

We received a grant for a Zoom license so we could meet safely & continue seeing one another to conduct the business of the Worship, church council, SPRC, and strategic planning and keep choir connected. We have renewed our license as our work will still require safe meetings.

What are the growing edges for the future? We are planning once again to adapt VBS so that it will be safe & fun and meaningful. We will adapt the Spring Fling; we will consider a Fall Festival, and Sunday school, and wild and important ministries that need to be adapted and designed to meet the needs of our neighbors near and far.

You, dear disciples, are the branches of the vine symbolized in the cross we look up to in the Sanctuary, rooted in the love of God, Jesus at the center, and faithful followers who remain connected to the center.

Jesus is the center of it all!