

**BEARING FRUIT**  
**May 10, 2009**  
**First Baptist, Ithaca**

Several weeks ago, Rich Rose asked me whether I would be willing to do the service today. While contemplating his request, I had a dream in which I came to church wearing a hospital gown. It was one of those dreams where you're not really ready to do what you're supposed to do. I had a copy of the sermon in my hand, but I had not prepared anything for the rest of the service. On top of that, I couldn't tie the ties in the back of the gown. Everyone knows that you can't stand up here in a gown that's flapping in the breeze. In real life, it's hard enough to remember whether those gowns are supposed to open in the front or the back, let alone the challenge of figuring out how to close the popular, one-size-fits-all style. So, in the dream, I went for help to Jud Kilgore, who was sitting in the congregation. I guess I figured that he, being a compassionate and caring doctor, would know something about hospital gowns and would be willing to assist me. My memory of the dream fades at that point. I awoke with some clarity about agreeing to do the sermon, but not the rest of the service. My thanks to Rich Barron for doing that.

I've worn a lot of hospital gowns lately, so it was no surprise that this image appeared in my dream. What struck me was the combination of three things – the first was the hospital gown, for me a symbol of vulnerability and the need for healing; then there was the role of preaching that I was supposed to assume in the service, which is a fairly exposed role for anyone; and finally there was my reaching out to a member of the congregation for help before I could step into that role. The dream left me with a sense of the vulnerability we each carry, our need for God's love and caring, and the way in which this community is a place where we can ask for and receive what we need. In recent weeks, God's love has become much more real to me through many expressions of caring from members of the congregation. I am more aware of the spirit of love that is present in each of us and that becomes a powerful source of transformation when we allow it to move through us.

It was to his community of disciples that Jesus offered his parting words in the passage from John's gospel we just heard. When Jesus said, *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you,* he was not talking about individual wishes and expectations that God would grant

private requests. His emphasis was on communal needs that grew out of relationship with him and his mission.

Jesus used the rich image of the vine and its branches to convey his message to his disciples. We can certainly relate to this image from our experience living in this part of New York State. If we have not actually tended vineyards, we have at least enjoyed seeing them along the sloping shores of the Finger Lakes and have perhaps tasted the wine made from local grapes. Seasonally, fruit seems far-removed from these early spring days, but in the consciousness of the vinegrower, the fruit is the outcome of every aspect of grape-growing - the planting, the nurturing, the harvesting, and the pruning. A fruitful yield is what it's all about and that requires care throughout every season.

Relationship is key to this image – the intimate relationship of God as the vinegrower with Jesus as the vine and with us, the people of God, as the branches. The vine is the source of life and strength for its branches. It grows up from the earth in the way that relationships form organically from within instead of being imposed from without. As a model for community, the vine represents the interrelatedness and equality of all the parts, infused with divine love. All branches are the same before God, all equally accountable to the standard of love that Jesus taught.

Let's look more closely at each part of the relationship. I imagine God, the vinegrower, as having maternal instincts toward the vine – protecting it, defending it against the elements and insects, cultivating and fertilizing the soil around it so it can grow healthy and strong. But instead, the vinegrower is portrayed in this passage as someone who removes every branch that bears no fruit and prunes the branches that bear fruit so they can bear more fruit. We are told that branches that don't abide in the vine are thrown into the fire and burned. It sounds a bit harsh.

Pruning was never a priority for the three generations of women who tended the much-loved garden behind the house in which I grew up. Rose bushes reached out their long tentacles and grabbed you as you walked down the path. We joked about the wisteria vine that threatened to wrap itself around your neck unless you ducked your head. It was nourished from below by a compost heap, but trailed uncontrollably across the side of the garage. The garden was a magical world for me as a child with many secret hiding places under bushes that had never been cut back. Even though I have since learned that plants benefit from pruning, I am a reluctant pruner.

The vinegrower in Jesus' story knows that the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine where the nutrients are most concentrated. If the branches are not pruned, the grapes decline in quality. It is not hard to make an analogy between this image and the pruning that must take place in our lives and in the life of the community in order for us to bear fruit. Whatever sabotages our capacity to trust and be responsive to the spirit of love within us must be cleared away. Sometimes we don't even recognize what is blocking the flow of love. Throughout the course of our lives, God breaks through our resistance and our blindness to shape us into the vessels of love we were intended to be.

As I was thinking about this image of pruning, the Persian poet, Rumi, came to mind and specifically a poem he wrote about the conversation between a chickpea boiling in a pot and the cook. The poem goes like this:

A chickpea leaps almost over the rim of the pot  
where it's being boiled.

“Why are you doing this to me?”  
[the chickpea says to the cook.]

The cook knocks him down with the ladle.  
“Don't you try to jump out.  
You think I'm torturing you.  
I'm giving you flavor,  
so you can mix with spices and rice  
and be the lovely vitality of a human being.

Remember when you drank rain in the garden?  
That was for this....”

Eventually the chickpea  
will say to the cook,  
“Boil me some more.  
Hit me with the skimming spoon.  
I can't do this by myself...  
You're my cook, ... my way into existence.  
I love your cooking.”

The chickpea cooking and the vine that is pruned seem to have something in common. I don't believe that difficult life experiences are inflicted upon us by

God, but when we are able to trust the power of love to transform even the worst of circumstances, we are freed from the fear that keeps us small and are restored to wholeness. For this we can feel a sense of gratitude.

John's gospel tells us that it is not possible to endure pruning or to bear fruit without being connected to Jesus, the true vine. The word "abide" is used 8 times in the gospel reading to convey this relationship. *Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.* "Abide" is kind of an old-fashioned word we don't use very often in everyday speech. It can have various definitions, but in this context, the meaning that seems to fit best is that of dwelling in, of belonging to, of making a home with. This is a close relationship that sustains our connection to self and community. It is not, however, a passive feeling of comfort and safety, a circling of the wagons around the known in our lives. This mutual abiding of the vine and its branches results in the bearing of much fruit. Without this relationship, Jesus says, we can do nothing.

Bearing fruit is a metaphor that needs to be translated into the stuff of our everyday lives. The epistle reading helps us understand its meaning. Verse seven in the passage we heard from First John says, *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* In verse twelve, we are told that *No one has ever seen God, but if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.* Love for one another is the fruit we bear when we abide in the vine. Just as children who have not formed a secure attachment with their parents early in life have difficulty establishing loving, stable relationships later on, this love cannot flow through us apart from our relationship with the divine. The Greek word "agape" – meaning love that gives, that sacrifices without expecting return – embodies the very nature of God. When we know this love, we can connect confidently with the love that is already present in others. We are freed from our need to rely on our own resources in solving problems and meeting challenges and can trust that Jesus, the vine, will take us wherever we need to go to accomplish God's purposes.

In their wonderful book entitled If God Is Love: Rediscovering Grace in an Ungracious World, Phillip Gulley and James Mulholland share their insights about the nature of God's unconditional love and what it means for us. Both authors are pastors who experienced rejection by spiritual communities who could not accept their belief that no one is excluded from the love of God. They write:

Nearly everyone believes that God is loving, but there is considerable debate over the width, length, height, and depth of this love. For many, God's love is limited and conditional, offered to some and not to others.

Grace, as defined by these authors, is “a commitment to the most difficult and demanding of human acts – engaging and loving... all persons, regardless of their beliefs, especially those who think and behave in ways we find unacceptable.”

Jesus demonstrated his love for the outcasts, those many considered unlovable [the authors point out]. Regrettably, [they say], many Christians have been unwilling to adopt the ethic of Jesus – a theology of inclusion, acceptance, and love. We've been unwilling to love and accept our enemies. We haven't even been excited about loving our neighbor.

The words of these authors reminded me of Dan Lamb's comments the other Sunday about the shooting in Binghamton and the refusal of some to acknowledge the man who killed others and himself as a human being worthy of God's love. We like to think of ourselves as open-minded and tolerant toward others, but we are probably all challenged on a daily basis to recognize the holy in people we are not drawn to, those whose life situations and beliefs do not coincide with ours. Seeing every person as our brother or sister created in the image of God, at some point, makes us uneasy, but it is this that Jesus describes as the fruit we are to bear.

Well, it's Mother's Day today, and I've said little about mothers. But the history of this day is very much in keeping with Jesus' command to love one another. As many of you probably know, the idea for celebrating Mother's Day was initiated by social activist Julia Ward Howe after the American Civil War as a call to unite women against war. She failed to get formal recognition for a Mother's Day for Peace, but Ann Jarvis, a young Appalachian homemaker, “organized women throughout the Civil War to work for better sanitary conditions for both sides, and in 1868 she began work to reconcile Union and Confederate neighbors.” This was a woman who sought to meet people's needs regardless of their beliefs or sympathies.

When Ann died, her daughter, Anna Jarvis, continued the spirit of her mother's crusade. On May 10, 1908, exactly 101 years ago today, the first Mother's Day service was celebrated at her mother's church in West Virginia with the handing out of 500 white carnations, one for each mother in the congregation. (That's a lot of mothers in one congregation.) “Anna chose Sunday to be Mother's Day because she intended the day to be commemorated and treated as a holy day.”

Years later, she was arrested for disturbing the peace while protesting against the commercialization of Mother's Day and said she regretted ever having started the day. [Wikipedia]

As you celebrate the mothers and maternal caregivers in your lives today, remember the gift of these early women and the belief they had that we can live together in peace and love. Through this community and all the communities in your lives, may you know the love of God that takes away fear and that frees us to bear fruit in the world. Amen.