

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

Sermon preached by the Rev. Douglas Clark, May 3, 2015

Fifth Sunday of Easter – 10:00 a.m. – Communion

First Congregational Church, UCC, Haddam, CT

“In essentials, unity; in nonessentials, diversity; in all things, charity”

Text: John 15:1-8

[Jesus said to the disciples,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been pruned by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

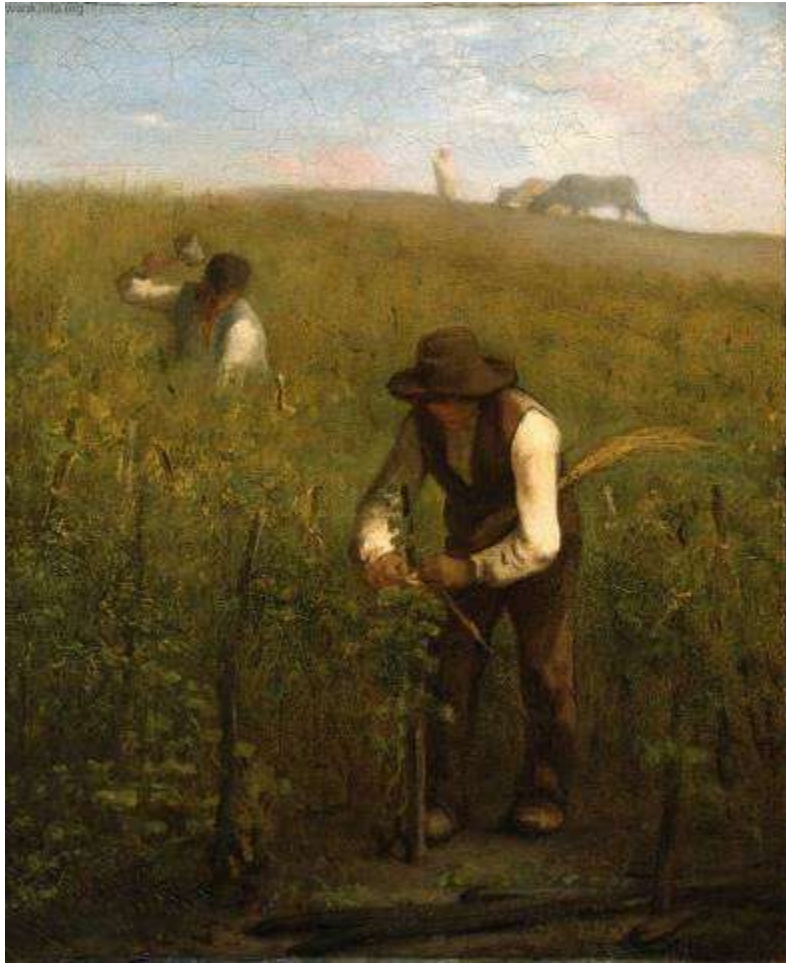


Image: Jean François Millet, *In the Vineyard*, 1852-1853, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston¹

¹ <http://diglib.library.vanderbilt.edu/diglib-fulldisplay.pl?SID=20150428843139648&code=act&RC=50342&Row=3>

Yesterday morning I spent a couple of hours with a work crew in the East River Preserve in Guilford. Our mission was to cut back or remove several invasive species that were encroaching on two different parts of the New England Trail. Armed with power tools and hand tools, four of us wrestled with Japanese barberry, winged euonymus, autumn olive, and last but not worst, *rosa multiflora*. This last is a nasty, sharp-thorned vine. I have several thorn marks on my forearms from this vine; it's at least as obnoxious a vine as poison ivy.

One of my fond childhood memories is sitting with my extended family on my Aunt Nellie's porch in Shelburne Falls, MA, sitting in the shade of the grapevine that wrapped around the porch. I remember little green curly tendrils that we would pick and eat. I remember that the grapes were the sweetest where the flesh of the fruit met the skin. A few summers ago, when my family and I visited my Aunt Nellie for the last time in her home, we sat on the porch in the shade of the grapevine, fifty years later.

When my family and I lived in Maryland, just outside D.C., I occasionally went on retreat with my clergy colleagues at a retreat center called Hallwood. On my way to this retreat center, I would drive past the Sugarloaf Mountain Vineyard and Winery, which produces Bordeaux-style wines. From a distance I would see workers in the vineyard; whether they were inspecting the grapevines or doing some early-season pruning, I couldn't tell. The grapevines looked extremely well cared for.

I can easily imagine Jesus, sitting with his disciples near a similar vineyard, gesturing toward the neat rows of grapevines and suggesting that his relationship with him is like that of the trunk of the vine to the branches of the vine. I am the vine, you are the branches.

The vine at one with its branches is an inspiring image of community. It is an organic metaphor for the discipleship community, for the church, for this congregation, First Congregational Church. Throughout this organic metaphor from John's portrait of Jesus, the "you" is always plural and never singular. Christian "spirituality," we may say, to use a popular contemporary concept, is always plural and never singular.

A spirituality that is plural—that is lived and enacted in community, not only in communion with Jesus, but also in community with others, where life is not always pure and holy but sometimes fractious and unsettling—a spirituality that is plural runs counter to today's culture of countless individual spiritual pathways.

Christian spirituality is not just about me and Jesus, me and God, me and the Spirit. Christian spirituality, like the flock of sheep or the carefully tended vineyard on the hillside, is about **we** and Jesus, **we** and God, **we** and the Spirit. In much contemporary spirituality, it's as if the vine had only one branch—the "me" branch. But the vine in the vineyard has many branches—the "we" branches. Christian spirituality is what Tom Wright calls "costly community"²—like it or not, we're in this Jesus thing together. One of the costs of discipleship is the cost of being a beloved community.

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□ <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/worship/sermons/2003/may/the-vine-and-the-branches>

There's some historical evidence that the “beloved community” for whom the Gospel of John was originally written was a community facing persecution and hostility. These forces of persecution and hostility impacted the quality of life within this beloved community, leading to doubts and questions and divisions among the members.

In the midst of persecution from without and division from within, the members of the community needed to be reassured and reminded of the calling to which Jesus had originally called them, their vocation of loving one another. They also needed to be reassured and reminded of Jesus' ongoing presence and influence in their midst—even though they, like us, couldn't actually see him or hear him. They, like us, are those who have not seen Jesus, yet have come to believe in him—and are blessed precisely because of this. And so it is that John's Gospel lifts up these evocative images of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the True Vine.

Notice how the image of the vine and branches is different from the image of the shepherd and the sheep. The shepherd and her flock do not remain in one place. They are nomadic. The shepherd has to herd the flock to green pastures and still waters. The vine and the branches, by contrast, remain rooted in the same place. The branches simply “abide” in the vine and are nourished by the vine and tended by the vine grower and bear fruit for the vine grower.

In Jesus' extended metaphor, a congregation of Christians is like this sturdy vine and its fruitful branches. Jesus is the vine, and we his followers are the branches, carefully tended by the vine-grower, who is God. Under the right conditions of weather and climate and soil nutrients, the vines and the vineyard will thrive and flourish: they—we—will bear much fruit, which can then become a fine wine, to be served at weddings or banquets or the Passover meal or the communion table.

No vineyard can thrive and flourish without the year-round care of the vine-grower. One of the important annual tasks of the vine-grower is pruning. Here is what the website of the Cooperative Extension Service at Michigan State University has to say about pruning:

“Pruning must be done each dormant season and it directly influences yield, fruit quality, vine vigor and hardiness. Proper pruning will result in maximum yields of high quality fruit without a reduction in hardiness during the following winter. Improper pruning will have a detrimental effect on each of these important vine characteristics. In economic terms, the ability to prune correctly can make the difference between a profit and a loss.”³

In our time as in Jesus' time, in Michigan as well as in Palestine, grapevines can become infected by “deadarm disease,” which is caused by two different kinds of fungus. The Michigan State University Extension recommends that infected branches be removed from the vine and “thrown into the fire and burned.

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□ <http://web1.msue.msu.edu/vanburen/e-1935.htm>

Not only do the bad branches need to be cut off and thrown into the fire and burned. Even the good branches need to be pruned. Again from MSU Extension: An average grapevine will have 200 to 300 buds on mature canes capable of producing fruit. If the vine were allowed to produce shoots and fruit from each of these, the result would be a large crop that would not ripen. The vine's effort to mature the crop would reduce cane maturity, reduce the productivity of buds the following season and decrease the size of the root system."

It's tempting to use this information to justify the Christian practice that is variously known as excommunication or banning or shunning: the removal and exclusion of certain people from the church because they don't live up to the standards of a particular community or tradition. Pruning the branches, however, is not a matter of separating individual Christians from the vine, from the church. It is rather a matter of identifying and removing unfruitful assumptions and practices from the life of the body.

You and I are living in a time when many congregations are in decline. Worship attendance is declining. Membership is declining. Financial contributions are declining. This sad but steady decline is not anyone's fault. We are living in a time when the weather or the climate or the soil conditions are not particularly favorable for the flourishing of God's vineyard, the church.

I recently shared with the Diaconate an article about how, and why, "the growing issue of frequency of [worship] attendance is impacting congregations" throughout North America. The title of the article was, "The Top Ten Reasons People Cite for Not Attending Church Services."⁴ The article was published online by the Center for Healthy Churches in North Carolina.

First, the bad news. If the trends identified in this article continue—and there's no reason to think they won't continue—if these trends continue, we will see growing numbers of churches closing their doors. Growing numbers of vineyards will be abandoned, because their owners can no longer afford to cultivate the vines.

This is the bad news. Now here's the good news. The Christian faith that binds us together in affection and friendship is all about life after death. By this I don't mean individual salvation understood as going to heaven after you die. I mean resurrection. I mean the vineyard that bursts forth with new growth after the dead of winter. I mean our New England hardwood trees and woods and forests that will soon be fully leafed out. I mean the garden that doesn't look like much today, but in a few months will bring forth a plentiful harvest.

The Center for Healthy Churches that I mentioned a few minutes ago uses as their "guiding metaphor" the garden.⁵ As you know, my "guiding metaphor" for interim ministry is the wilderness journey. My responsibility as your wilderness

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Bill Wilson, "The Growing Issue of Frequency of Attendance," <http://healthy-churches.org/the-growing-issue-of-frequency-of-attendance/>.

⁵ <http://chchurches.org/us/garden-metaphor-healthy-churches/>.

guide is to lead you as a pilgrim people to the promised land: which is not a place on a map but rather a season of fruitfulness.

We are reminded by today's reading that one of Jesus' "guiding metaphors" for the church, the discipleship community, is the fruitful vineyard. We could say that the fruitful vineyard is the promised land that lies at the end of our wilderness journey together. This vineyard will not be the vineyard of 315 years ago, or even of fifteen years ago. The fruitful vineyard of the future church will "emerge from [a] dream translated into a plan, followed by an implementation process."⁶

To put this in less metaphorical and more practical terms, the future of your church will emerge from a mission translated into a vision, followed by a strategic plan. None of this, by the way, is easy work. And it will ask of you that you adopt a different angle of vision on what it means to be a fruitful congregation in today's world.

Here's an example of what I mean. Last year, Mary and I met with a landscape designer, to help us figure out what to do with our property in Guilford. We met with her because we liked her emphasis on "native plants and organic techniques."⁷ The landscape designer pointed out some things that were obvious to her, but that we had never really paid attention to. She noted in her report, her "strategic plan" if you will, that there are "five distinct zones around our home." Each of these five zones needs to be landscaped differently.

For instance, much of our front lawn lies in the shade for most of the day, even in the middle of summer. My vision, if you will, had been, I should plant grass that does particularly well in shady conditions. But Kathy, the landscape designer, helped me see the beautiful ground moss that was already thriving in the shaded areas. She put together a plan for me to encourage the growth of the ground moss, rather than trying to replace it with grass. Now I need to actually implement the plan she came up with, which will require soil testing and weeding and specialized kinds of soil enhancements.

Full disclosure: my angle of vision tends in the direction of short-term results (not quite instant gratification, but toward that end of the spectrum). Which probably helps to explain why I seem well-fitted to interim ministry rather than to settled ministry. Which also means that I sometimes have to push myself to look beyond short-term gratification and do what I need to do in the service of a longer-term plan.

But back to the vine and the branches, to Jesus and the church. These are tough times for many churches like ours in North America. On the one hand, we can predict with some certainty that if the current decline in membership, worship attendance, and financial contributions continues, we might be able to hang on for another decade or two. On the other hand, there is both anecdotal and empirical evidence that following Jesus in community does bear fruit, though not necessarily on our timetable. The benefits of more intentionally following

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ <http://speakingoflandscapes.com/kathleen-groll-connolly-resume>.

Jesus may not be immediately evident, but the promise of the gospel is that the vineyard will ultimately bear fruit.

In the course of the next few months, you and I will be in serious and thoughtful conversation about your vineyard here in Haddam.

We will be looking together at your mission, your fundamental reasons for being this church.

We will be exploring what kind of fruit God the vine-grower is calling you to bear.

We will be thinking about what it means to abide in Jesus, who is the true vine.

We will be examining your current assumptions and practices, and deciding where they need to be pruned.

We will be writing together a new chapter in the story of this church, a chapter that moves from decline and sadness to new life and joyfulness.

And most of all, we will be seeking to strengthen our common trust in God, who is the ultimate keeper of the vineyard we call First Congregational Church of