

Year B 5th Sunday of Easter John 15 v1 to 8 I am the vine

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

We are a people of productivity. It is, for the most part, the standard by which we live and the measure of our success. It is built into our lives everywhere. Productivity is the basis of our economic system. Those who produce are rewarded and get more. Those who do not produce are thrown out.

This gets drilled into us beginning at an early age. We are expected to produce in school – do the assignments, get the grades, and be rewarded. Those who do not produce in school find themselves struggling from behind, maybe beginning to misbehave, sometimes dropping out, sometimes being thrown out. Our ability to hold down a job depends on productivity. If we are not producing, bringing in money for our employers, we’ll be “let go” in favour of someone else. Advancing in our careers depends on productivity. The person most benefitting the company will be the person who gets the promotion. Productivity has even infiltrated parenthood and become the standard measure. Perhaps you are a parent who has been complimented on a job well done because your children have grown up to be successful. Perhaps you are the child who has been told, in the moment of demonstrating some positive trait, “Your parents have done a good job raising you.”

Productivity at some level is even at the core of the debates around poverty, welfare, healthcare, and the elderly. Many Canadians, when asked, will tell you that poor people are simply lazy, not looking for work, not trying to be productive. When the COVID-19 pandemic was first sweeping across the world in a wave of sickness and death, some people on social media actually said things like, “Well, it’s almost all old people who are dying and they’re going to die soon anyway so, whatever.” The unspoken presumption is that old people no longer contribute much to the productivity of society so...oh well if they die.

We have been convinced by the world that productivity is the goal and only the fittest survive. Pruned branches produce fruit and so they are rewarded while non-productive branches are punished. If we produce good fruit, God will love us. If we don't produce fruit, we are tossed aside and burned. This can be a pretty scary metaphor if we look at it from the world's way of thinking – Do or Die...Shape up or ship out...Work to get ahead in life...But get ahead in what?

In the world's way of thinking, we hear things in this passage like 'we will glorify God by bearing fruit' and 'branches not bearing fruit will be burned' and we think to ourselves that this passage is a call to action – we must bear fruit. Even worse, we must bear fruit or God will reject us in the end, we will be judged and found lacking. Bearing fruit is God's demand upon our lives and the way in which we make God happy. This way of thinking almost certainly leads to comparing ourselves to others. We start judging ourselves – and others – based on how much fruit we bear, how many good works we do. I do more good works than Sally so I must be more pleasing to God. But this type of thinking - the world's way of thinking –turns God into an angry God waiting to punish. A God who weighs us on our merits, our good works. This is not God's way and, as God's children, it is not our way. As important as it is for us to act on our faith, this passage is not primarily a call to action. Bearing fruit is not the main point of this gospel reading.

Jesus is calling our attention to something more important than producing fruit. You can work hard in life always "producing" for people, for your boss, for instance who says, "Good job – keep it up" and moves on. Your productivity does not build a relationship - it creates transactions, surface interactions. Jesus is not talking about or demanding productivity. In the eight verses of this gospel reading, we hear the word "abide" eight times. We are to abide in him as he abides in us. This is not about productivity. Jesus wants and offers a relationship – a close, loving relationship.

Jesus, the vine, is being cared for by God the Father. Out of the vine, branches appear – that's us. Taking the nourishment from the vine, the branches sprout and grow, reaching out in all directions. They stretch out, they spread – but

always remain connected to the vine...always sustained by that life-giving relationship and always being cared for by the vine grower who is God the Father. And out of that connection and care, fruit blossoms on those branches. The vine didn't demand that fruit grow on its branches. Fruit grows as a result of the nourishment and sustenance flowing through the branches from the vine. We see a direct line from the fruit that we bear in our lives going back to our connection with Jesus Christ going back to the care originating from the Father. Our good works are directly connected to the relationship we have in God through Christ making sense for us of Jesus' words when he tells us, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

If we know that the good fruit produced in our lives goes back through the connection with the vine to the vine grower, we must also, then, realize that the connection works in the other direction. There is an outward flow of love and care from the vine grower, into the vine, through the branches, and into the fruit. It is an outward flow of love from God the Father, through God the Son, into us, and into our lives. The fruit we bear is the love that blooms out of this incredible relationship we are able to have with God.

We bear fruit because we are connected with God. We are not alone and we don't work alone. God, the vine grower, is ready to give the branches whatever they need to produce fruit... "Ask for whatever you wish," Jesus tells us, "Ask and it will be done for you." Whatever we need in order to reveal God's love to this broken world will be given to us.

And there is another way in which we don't go it alone. If you are familiar with a vine at all, you know that there are many, many branches connected to the main vine...all tangled up, often indistinguishable from each other. It's difficult to tell where one branch ends and another begins. We may often feel like a tangled up mess but, together, we are the branches with God's love flowing through us into the world. One love, one life together, joined to God through Christ.

Last week we heard about Jesus the Good Shepherd of us, his little flock. One sheep is never a flock. There must be multiple sheep together following the shepherd. We often hear Paul talking about us as being the body of Christ – arms, legs, ears, eyes, etc. – all working together. Now we hear Jesus calling us the

branches of a vine...vines never have just one branch. It is not a coincidence that all of these communal images are being used to describe us.

As much as we may have been conditioned to think that our faith is a private thing only between us and God, it is not. As we continuously strive to become more and more like Christ, we hold before us the truth that Jesus Christ is an inseparable part of our three-person God joined with the bonds of perfect love in perfect relationship. Always together. Always loving. It is not surprising then, that God's purpose is – and always has been – for us to love one another, to love the world he gave to us, and to love him...to be in perfect relationship.

We must push the world's way of thinking out of our minds. It is not all about producing fruit on our own – it's a "together" thing. This passage is not a call to produce – it's a call to love. It is love that results in action, the fruit. John puts it bluntly in his letter. "Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." Revealing the kingdom to the world is to draw the world into that relationship with us. One body in Christ. One flock with one shepherd. Branches joined to the one vine.