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Sermon 2 May 2021

Title: Verbs from the vineyard

- Good morning church! It is so good to have you join us on this fifth Sunday of the Easter season. We trust that you have been aware of God's presence as you've worshipped with us this morning—
- It has been a beautiful week here in Largs—it's been so exciting to see the shops and the restaurants open again—people sitting at the tables in the sunshine—I believe that this is just about my favourite time of year.
- It was about this time of year, maybe a few weeks earlier, back in 2017—that's been 4 years ago now, which is hard to believe—Pastor Tasha and I were still living in South Carolina—and we went over to Tasha's grandmother's house one day in the early Spring. Now Mama Abear, that's what we called her grandmother, she had not too long before that decided that she would move out of her house, where she had been living alone for many years-- she figured, and we all did too, that she was getting to the age that maybe she might not want to have all the responsibility of a house and a big yard and all that just to herself, and maybe she could use some assistance and someone to watch out for her and to keep her company—you know, the family visited often and helped out tremendously but there comes a time when we all get old enough that we don't want to live by ourselves and we'd like to have some help available 24-hours-a-day—and she was getting to that age, she was 99, almost 100, and so she moved into an assisted living community and for a little while her house was empty and it needed looking after.

- One of the things that needed looking after was the grape vines that grew in the yard beside her house. And if you've ever looked after grape vines, you know that they need to be pruned each year before the growing season so that they'll produce an abundant harvest, so that they'll bear much fruit. And in this picture you can see that's me trying to figure out which branches to cut back— you have to cut away the old wood to make room for new growth, because it's the new growth that produces fruit. Vines with too much old wood will not bloom and bear fruit, but those with too much growth won't produce well either because there will be too many branches needing nourishment from the vine. So pruning increases the amount of fruit that is produced by controlling the growth and making sure that all the branches receive the nourishment that they need from the main vine so that they bear fruit.
- Now you have to make sure that you do this during the right time of year because you don't want to remove the live branches—and it can get a little confusing—it can be hard to tell whether you've already cut a branch or not, because vine branches tend to get all tangled up and intertwined so that it's difficult to tell one from another. And Mama Abear had two different kinds of grapes growing on these vines—there were muscadines—they were purple—and there were scuppernongs—they were green—or gold they were called—and you really couldn't tell the branches of one of those from the other unless there was fruit on them—but when they bore fruit, you knew exactly what vine those branches were connected to—by their fruit, you could know them.
- And if you made sure to prune your muscadine and scuppernong vines in early Spring, then come September you'd have a lot of grapes to make jelly with—or wine or whatever—you could also just eat them, which is what I like to do.

- This week I've been thinking a lot about pruning those vines, and all the times that we picked the fruit that they produced over the years, because as you heard Pastor Tasha read, our scripture for this week is the familiar passage from the gospel of John in which Jesus says to his disciples, "I am the vine, and you are the branches."
- Now, our scripture last week was from chapter 10 of John's gospel, and there we heard Jesus say to the crowds around him, "I am the gate," and "I am the Good Shepherd," and we explored how Jesus used that last metaphor to describe the relationship between Himself and his followers. We also discussed in our Second Helping Bible study last Sunday evening how the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd had been used before in scriptures that the Jewish people would have been familiar with to illustrate the relationship between God and His people.
- This week we are in chapter 15, and Jesus is speaking not to the crowd, but to his disciples. In fact chapters 14, 15, and 16 are often referred to in Bible translations as Jesus' comforting his disciples before his passion and crucifixion, which are about to take place right after Jesus prays in chapter 17.
- Chapter 15 is in the middle of this address to Jesus' disciples—these words that will comfort them and direct them and assist them during the trying time that is about to happen—and Jesus is letting them know what they need to know and to remember in order to get through it. And as is often the case, Jesus' words to his disciples 2000 years ago are also meaningful to his disciples in 2021.
- Now, at the end of chapter 16, we see that the disciples are happy because Jesus is finally speaking plainly to them—not with figures of speech—not with metaphors that may be hard to understand—but back here in chapter 15 Jesus is still using metaphor—figures of speech—and his metaphorical imagery here involves vines and branches and

fruit. And like the imagery of the sheep and the shepherd, this is imagery that had been used before in Scripture to describe the relationship between God and his people, in both positive and negative ways.

- In Psalm 80, the Psalmist calls for help from God to restore the vine that He planted when he brought the Hebrew people out of Egypt, and it took root but was attacked by its enemies and burned and cut down
- Isaiah chapter 5 describes the house of Israel as a vineyard planted and cared for by God the vine-dresser—a vineyard that did not produce fruit as it should and now stands under God’s judgement—God says “And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. . . 6 I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns. . . .” 7 For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel. . . he expected justice, but saw bloodshed—he expected justice but saw bloodshed—that could refer to our current society just as easily as to ancient Israel
- And we see this pattern, this imagery used often in the Hebrew scriptures—it’s in Ezekiel 15, and 17 and 19, and Jeremiah 2—the image of Israel as the vine and God as the vinegrower and vinedresser, who is usually disappointed with the fruit that the vine bears.
- But now, in John’s gospel, God is still the vinegrower, the one who plants and tends and judges and prunes and gives the ability to bear fruit, but the vine is not Israel but Jesus, whose disciples are the branches—and just as Jesus talked about one flock who depend upon the one Good shepherd last week in chapter 10, so this week he refers to Himself as the “true” vine, whose branches form the body of Christ—and we can assume that if there is a “true” vine, then there are other vines that are untrue or false.

- Last week we walked through four characters that we found in the extended metaphor that Jesus used in chapter 10—they were “the sheep, the Good Shepherd, the hired hand and the wolf.” Now those are all nouns, and understanding what those nouns meant and to whom they referred was key to understanding last week’s scripture—but this week I want us to explore five verbs that I think are key to understanding the extended metaphor that Jesus uses when he talks about the vine and the vinegrower and the branches—and those five verbs (actually it could be argued that they are gerunds, but I’m not going to be pedantic) are: removing; pruning; abiding; bearing fruit; and finally asking.
- Now last week it was fairly simple to walk through each of those nouns one at a time—but these 5 verbs in this week’s scripture, they tend to get intertwined and tangled up with each other, so that rather than talk about one and then the next and then the next, you sort of have to talk about all of them at once—but we will do the best we can to clear a path through toward what Jesus is saying here.
- Let’s begin by looking at our text—verse 1—Jesus is here giving us another “I am” statement—in fact this is the last time He will make such a statement in John’s gospel—He says “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.” This sounds very much like that language we heard in Psalm 80 and in Isaiah, doesn’t it? Verse 2 The vine-grower **removes** every branch in me that **bears no fruit.**—There already are two of our verbs—removing and bearing fruit, and here comes a third—“Every branch that bears fruit he **prunes** to make it bear more fruit.”—So there are three of our five verbs already—
- Here Jesus has set up the metaphor He is using—He is the vine, and that vine has branches—we’ll see that those branches are the disciples, followers of Jesus—and we

see here that there are two kinds of branches—there are branches that bear fruit and there are branches that bear no fruit—and that’s where the Father, the vine-grower, comes in—Jesus tells us that the Father, the vine-grower, takes one of two actions with regard to the branches—He does one of two things depending on whether a branch bears fruit or not—either He removes it if it bears no fruit, or, if it bears fruit, He prunes it so that it bears MORE fruit.

- Now let’s put the removal of branches that bear no fruit to the side for just a minute and let’s think about these branches that DO bear fruit—they are, Jesus tells us in verse 2, pruned by the Father so that they bear more fruit. But then in verse 3 Jesus says to his disciples: “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.”
- And you might think, “Wait a minute—there’s a verb that you missed—cleansing—Jesus says that the disciples have been “cleansed” by the word Jesus spoke to them. Now what Jesus says literally is that the disciples are already “clean” but what is even more interesting is that the Greek root of the word that is translated as “cleansed” or “clean”—that’s the word *katharos*-- and the root of the word that is translated as “pruned”—that’s the word *kathairó*—the root is the same—it’s the Greek word from which we get the English words “cathartic” and “catharsis.”
- And that Greek word means to cleanse or to purge or to purify—and so sometimes in English we’ll say that having a good cry while watching a sad movie or playing the blues on your guitar actually makes you feel better because it is a cathartic experience—it purges or cleanses or purifies you of negative feelings—and in medical terminology, if something is a cathartic it has a laxative effect—and sometimes people talk about taking some kind of “cleanse” or another, like a juice cleanse to remove toxins—what they mean is that they’re getting emptied out—purged and purified—

- And so even though in English the words “prune” and “cleanse” have different meanings, in the Greek here Jesus is talking about the same thing—catharsis—the cathartic action of the Father who prunes the vines that bear fruit and the cathartic action of Jesus words which cleanse the disciples—and that’s easy to remember if you’ve ever eaten too many prunes—if you’ve ever experienced a “prune cleanse”—because that is also a cathartic experience.
- But Jesus is saying to his disciples here that even though they have been made clean, God’s purifying cathartic action doesn’t stop there—God continues to prune them as they bear fruit—in order that they bear more fruit—and if you think about it, both cleansing and pruning are about loss—about removal—when you’re made clean the uncleanness is removed—the disciples have lost their guilt and shame and sin and self-centeredness and carnality—but God isn’t through with them—as they produce fruit He continues to prune them so that they produce more fruit—in soteriological terms, in terms of salvation, that’s what “growing in grace” is—in Wesleyan terms that’s “sanctification”—there is an initial “cleansing” that is followed by a perfecting “pruning” as God continues to remove those things that would hinder our spiritual growth—as we give them up to him—as we empty ourselves—that’s having the same mind as Christ—that’s being a living sacrifice—
- So pruning and cleansing are fundamentally about loss—about losing what isn’t good for us or for the Kingdom—but as humans—through our human perspective—it can be hard to think of loss as a positive thing—we don’t like to lose—we don’t like to lose money, we don’t like to lose time, we don’t like to lose friends or loved ones, we don’t like to lose our dignity or our status or our reputations—but remember that Jesus is preparing his disciples for his Passion and crucifixion—they are about to experience loss—the loss

of their friend and Saviour, the loss of their security, the loss of meaning—but Jesus is reminding them that loss is what cleansing and pruning is all about—and it is necessary if they are to bear fruit

- When we look back at the past year it's easy to think of the things we've lost—our church building, fellowship with friends and family, our freedoms that we used to take for granted—but what if we thought of the last year or so as a time of pruning—a time when we were being prepared to bear fruit? It becomes exciting to think of what the future holds—this was Jesus' message to his disciples—there's a future beyond what you can imagine just over the horizon—but you've gotta hang on to get there
- And so in the next verses, Jesus has a clear command for his disciples. You'll remember that when John wants to emphasise something, when he wants to make sure we GET IT, he often repeats things—see if you can guess what is being emphasised here in verses 4-7, where Jesus is telling his disciples HOW they can be branches that bear fruit. Jesus says: 15:4 **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.
15:5 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.
15:6 Whoever does not **abide** in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.
15:7 If you **abide** in me, and my words **abide** in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.
- In those FOUR verses, Jesus uses the word “abide” EIGHT times—I think abiding is probably important, don't you? John not only talks about “abiding” here but he uses it some 40 times throughout his gospel

- And “abide” is one of only two commands that Jesus gives his disciples here in these verses—we’ll get to the other one in just a minute—but notice that Jesus doesn’t command his disciples to “bear fruit”—no, that’s up to God, who prunes them so that they can bear fruit—no, Jesus simply commands “abide in me” and promises “as I abide in you.” That word—the Greek root is *menó*—it means to remain, to stay to wait with, to accompany, to tarry, to make one’s home—abiding is what you do in your abode and your abode is your home, it’s where you live—it’s where you dwell—and that’s what Jesus is asking of his disciples—dwell in me and I will dwell in you—make your home in me and I will make my home in you—don’t just visit, don’t just entertain Jesus for a little while like a guest—make Him your home and allow him to dwell in you as a permanent resident—that’s how you bear fruit—you take up residence in the vine-- a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it **abides** in the vine, neither can you unless you **abide** in me.
- Jesus tells us: Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.
- Jesus’ is inviting his disciples to choose—not to choose to bear fruit, that’s up to God—but to choose to make themselves available—to avail themselves of the cleansing and pruning activity of the Father by remaining in the vine, choosing to abide—to stay home—oh we’ve heard that a lot over the last year haven’t we? And just as we could choose not to stay home, Jesus shows us that it’s entirely possible to choose not to abide in Him.
- Last week we mentioned those that might say that they don’t want to be a sheep in a flock with a shepherd—they want their independence, their autonomy—and in the same way, there may be those who do not want to be a branch on a vine—they want to be self-sufficient—but Jesus tells us here that being removed from the life and the

nourishment of the vine, even though it might look good (like being a sheep without a shepherd) is not autonomy—not independence—not self-sufficiency—it is death

- Jesus tells his disciples in verse 6: Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.
- This was what Jesus was talking about in verse 2 when He said that the Father, the vinegrower “removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.”
- It would be easy, and I have heard sermons that do this—to make these verses sound like an accusing and condemning threat—a way of delineating the insiders from the outsiders—and while this certainly is a word of warning that there is a danger—just as there was a wolf in last week’s scripture, so there is removal and getting thrown into the fire—but I think that we need to read these words alongside what Jesus says in John’s gospel chapter 12, verse 47, where Jesus says “I came not to judge the world, but to save the world,” and in chapter 3 verse 17, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”
- And when we consider those verses as well we can see that the “removing” and “burning” that God does is less an act of condemnation and more the result of choosing not to abide where there is life and nourishment—in the vine. Jesus is not suddenly in chapter 15 going to contradict what He’s said in chapters 3 and 12—no, this is a statement about life and where it is to be found—it’s a reminder that without connection to the life source, the true vine, abundant life is impossible.
- Notice, too, if you would, who does the removing of those branches that don’t abide and don’t bear fruit—that’s the job of the vine-grower, not of the other branches—Jesus doesn’t tell his disciples to watch out for those other branches and make sure they’re bearing fruit and if they’re not, you get rid of them—cut them off and send them away—

no, that's the vine-grower's job—Jesus calls the branches to abide in Him as He abides in them

- And that's not just good advice for individual disciples, it's good advice for the church as well—it's a reminder that when the church doesn't abide in the vine—when it relocates, when it moves away from its life-source—when we get focused on cultural or political or mere social issues, when we become an institution that tries to accommodate the world rather than transforming it, there is a danger of becoming a self-serving, self-preserving institution that's dried up and dead and fit to be removed and thrown into the fire—that's what Dr King was talking about when he said that “The church must be reminded that it is . . .the conscience of the state. It must be the guide and the critic of the state, and never its tool. If the church does not recapture its prophetic zeal, it will become an irrelevant social club without moral or spiritual authority.” The church is called to abide in the vine.
- Jesus tells us: Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit-- Jesus mentions “bearing fruit” SIX times in these 8 verses. Now Jesus doesn't tell us exactly what “bearing fruit” looks like, and I think that's because bearing fruit can look like a great many things—bearing fruit can mean leading someone to Jesus, bearing fruit can mean being an example that others can follow, it can mean supporting the ministries of the church, it can mean being a listening ear for someone who's grieving or depressed, it can mean feeding the hungry, lifting up the poor from poverty, freeing those who are oppressed, standing up for those who are marginalised, visiting those who are lonely—bearing fruit can take an infinite number of forms—but one thing remains true about bearing fruit whatever form it takes and that's this—a branch of the true vine doesn't consume its own fruit—the fruit that the branch produces is for the nourishment and

edification and sustenance of others—the branch that abides in the true vine receives its nourishment, its strength and its power from the vine and then produces fruit, not for its own needs, not for its own preservation, but for others—and bearing fruit reveals what vine a branch is connected to—it reveals who you are and WHOSE you are—it reveals on WHOM you depend—that’s why Jesus tells us in Matthew’s gospel that “by their fruit you shall know them.”

- Now we’ve said that there are two commands that Jesus gives to His disciples in these verses—the first command was “abide”—abide in me and I’ll abide in you—but Jesus gives his disciples a second command that is dependent upon that first one—and He does that in verse 7—Jesus says “7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”
- Jesus’ second command here is “ask.” Ask for what? Whatever you wish and it will be done for you.” Now before you echo Janis Joplin and say “Oh Lord won’t you buy me a Mercedes Benz” it’s important to look at the first part of this promise—Jesus says “IF you abide in me and my words abide in you” THEN ask for whatever you wish and it will be done—if you are abiding in Jesus and he is abiding in you, if you are directed and guided by the Holy Spirit every minute of every day, if you have the same mind as Jesus, then what you wish is going to be the same as what Jesus wishes, the same as what the Holy Spirit desires, and that is for the building of the Kingdom and the proclamation of the gospel and for the redemption and transformation of all of creation and when that is what you ask for, you can be absolutely assured that not even the gates of Hell will prevail against it and you will bear fruit beyond what you can even ask or imagine. That’s how the abundance of the Kingdom works—even in times of cleansing and times of

pruning, even in times of loss and grief and suffering—even during the crucifixion—
God’s abundant provision is still at work.

- Jesus tells us finally in verse 8 that the Father is glorified “when you bear much fruit and become my disciples”—when you BECOME my disciples—that’s what’s happening through that cleansing and pruning and bearing fruit and pruning and bearing fruit, all the while abiding in Jesus and He in us, we are becoming disciples—we are under construction, in progress, we are being tended and perfected
- And that, I think, is a powerful vision of the church—branches abiding in the vine, shaped and formed by the vine-grower, tangled up with each other, entwined in relationship with each other, drawing nourishment from our connection to Jesus and bearing fruit for each other, for the community, for the world—asking for what we wish—for revival, for the building of the Kingdom, asking that God’s will would be done on earth as it is in heaven—growing together and becoming disciples.
- That’s where I want to abide—that’s where I want to remain, where I want to make my home, and I hope you do too.
- Have a great week and be sure to join us again next Sunday—until then, may God bless you and keep you.