

To a people yet unborn -- 5/2/21

What is it about fruit?

Why are some of the most memorable metaphors in the Bible

About fruit?

Or maybe it's not so much that the Bible contains so many fruit metaphors,

As that people wrote a lot of camp songs about fruit.

Oh the fruit of the Spirit's not a coconut...

That's based on a verse in Galatians,

But there's even songs based on this week's scripture.

He is the vine and we are the branches,

His banner over me is love.

He's a peach of a Savior...

I don't know exactly what it means to be bananas for the Lord,

But if it's anything like how Dinah feels about actual bananas,

You're probably doing pretty good.

My point here is that this metaphor of Jesus being the true vine,

And Jesus' followers being the branches,

This idea is well known in this church.

At least, I assume this to be true since

It's written on the wall by the kitchen over there.

This metaphor, this set of verses in the gospel of John,

Has a long history among Mennonites and other Anabaptists.

From the very beginning 5 centuries ago,

The people who broke from their church,

And by extension their government,

Were by nature a freethinking and noncompliant group.

This made them excellent martyrs,

Willing to die for their new way of believing in Jesus,  
Willing to preach the new baptism to the crowds  
That came to see them executed.  
The downside of this fervent faith,  
This willingness to die over a single disagreement with the church,  
Was that it was difficult to come up with a set of beliefs  
That all of them could agree on.  
This is obviously a gross oversimplification of the matter,  
But the fact remains that there were many disagreements  
Among the early Anabaptists,  
Some major, some minor,  
But almost all argued at the highest of stakes.  
After all, they were trying to create a new church from scratch,  
One that imitated the earliest Christian church.  
Whether they succeeded or not, I suppose is up to God,  
But what we know for sure is that they argued about it.  
When the Amish split from the Mennonites in 1693,  
It got ugly.  
In college, we studied this book,  
Letters of the Amish Division,  
Which has a lot of the back and forth correspondence  
Between the faction that would become the Amish  
And the faction that would remain as Mennonites.  
One thing I remember from this book is  
The use of Jesus' metaphor of the vine and the branches  
Being used in a way I hadn't seen before.  
Both sides were 100% sure that their side

Was the branch bearing the good fruit.  
And that all other Christians were the bad branches,  
Ready to be lopped off and thrown into the fire.  
And the tone was very much like,  
All other Christians are bad branches,  
But specifically you guys, you're the worst branches.  
You're definitely going in the fire.

All this in a dispute between two groups whose beliefs were so similar,  
You have to study Mennonite or Anabaptist history  
To even understand what they were arguing about.  
Few enough people understand the difference between  
Amish and Mennonite these days,  
When we dress and drive and live quite differently.  
And I hope these days we're less convinced  
That each other is destined for the fire.

The reason I bring up this ugly fight from 320 years ago  
Is to attempt to eliminate this very bad way of interpreting these verses.

In attempting to decide who is bearing good fruit and who is not,  
Our Mennonite and Amish forebears were usurping God's role in the story.

The whole point Jesus is making in this metaphor  
Is that we are the branches,  
Which means we specifically are not the vine or the vinegrower.

We aren't the ones who decide which fruit is good or bad,  
And we definitely aren't the ones who do the pruning.

Jesus says,  
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.  
I love this metaphor of Jesus being the vine because  
It's ok, in fact, it's a good thing for a vine to have many branches.  
The Mennonites and Amish who split in 1693 didn't understand this.  
They had decided that there was one right way to worship God,  
Only one right way to follow Jesus,  
And it just happened to be their way.  
In our verses today, Jesus says abide in me.  
In Greek, this literally just means remain or stay in me.  
Don't leave, don't cut yourself off from Jesus.  
Our focus is supposed to be Jesus,  
Not trying to figure out whose branch is best,  
Whose fruit is the sweetest, who needs to be thrown the fire.  
Abide in Jesus, stay on the vine.  
In other words, just be the best little branch you can be.  
If you're clinging on to Jesus, you'll be ok.  
Sometimes when we look around, though,  
We see other people following Jesus in ways we find worrisome.  
Being a Christian, especially an Anabaptist Christian,  
Can feel like being a very little branch indeed,  
Surrounded by a forest of other branches, other beliefs,  
Other ways of being a Christian.  
Even within our own church we have a beautiful variety  
Of theologies and traditions, of belief and unbelief.  
However, we can become fearful and anxious.  
We look at other Christians following Jesus differently,  
According to different norms, with different practices and beliefs.

And we become concerned,  
That because these Christians disagree with us,  
They might not bear fruit like we do.  
Or worse, these rogue unfruitful branches might contaminate  
The whole vine.  
They might suck up light and nutrients  
That of course rightly belong to our branch, the good branch.  
Sometimes we whisper our worries amongst ourselves,  
What if they don't read the Bible enough?  
What if no one gets married anymore?  
What if they bring in their liberal agenda?  
What if they bring in their conservative agenda?  
What if they're part of a new, but growing fascist movement in the US?  
What if the pastor just talks about love all the time,  
and not about other people's sins that I don't like?  
We whisper our worries until like worms they start eating at our branches.  
In worrying about how troubling other branches may become,  
We become unfruitful ourselves,  
Worry-worm-eaten and cut off from the vine.  
We forget about the beginning of our passage from John,  
I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower,  
He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.  
Every branch that bears fruit he prunes  
To make it bear more fruit.  
I don't know how much you know about grapevines.  
I knew basically nothing until I had a grapevine in Colorado.  
And compared to people who work in actual vineyards,

I still know basically nothing about grapevines.  
What I learned in Colorado is that grapevines need to be pruned each year.

Not like a trim or a light pruning.

To be fruitful, a grapevine must be pruned almost all the way down,  
Cutting off virtually all growth from the previous year.

A grapevine after pruning is thick, woody, and bare.

Not just the unfruitful branches, or canes, get cut off,

But the fruitful ones, too.

When Jesus says,

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit,

That means cutting it almost all the way off.

At most, just a small section of each year's growth remains

And becomes a permanent part of the vine.

It sounds kind of awful, doesn't it?

These canes, these branches, spend all year growing and growing,

Sending out leaves, growing flowers,

Transforming flowers into fruits and seeds,

Holding heavy bunches of grapes until the harvest.

These branches do all this, and after the grapes are harvested,

Whack!

Cut off and thrown in the fire.

And all that's left is a little nub at the base of where it grew.

The part most directly connected to the vine remains, abides,

To start everything over next year.

If both the fruitful and unfruitful branches eventually get pruned,

Then the point of Jesus' metaphor of the vine

Is not really about which branches bear fruit and which don't.

This metaphor is not about our relationship to the other branches,  
It's strictly about our connection to Jesus Christ.

Our fruitfulness is simply a function of our abiding in Jesus.

It's a bit of an ego check, frankly,  
Because the reality of the grapevine is that  
In its multigenerational life cycle,  
The branches don't really matter that much.

It does sound harsh and brutal,  
But to me it also sounds liberating.

The fact that Jesus is the true vine,  
That God is in charge of the pruning and the harvest,  
Liberates us from the need to feed our worry worms.  
It relieves us of the need to judge, to condemn, to discourage.

We don't need to worry about those other branches.  
We don't need to worry that if we don't put our foot down,  
If we don't stand up and condemn those bad branches,  
The vine might collapse and die.

The image Jesus gives us of the vine  
Is an invitation to individuality, not conformity.  
What matters about a branch is one thing only.  
Is it connected? Does it abide in the vine?  
If so, it will bear fruit. If not, it won't.  
Either way God is the one who decides,  
God is the one who judges the fruit  
And who cuts all the branches back to their truest selves,  
Where they connect to the vine.

No branch by growing the wrong way can hurt the vine,

Or stop the others from being fruitful.

Anxiety lies, folks.

This is not the last time I'm going to remind you of this.

I've dealt with my share of anxiety in my own head,

And I know many of you have too.

I'll say it again, Anxiety lies.

Anxiety is that worry worm that tells us,

If I believe something different from what I learned in Sunday School,

I'm probably a heretic or something.

Anxiety says,

New ways of reading the Bible cannot be trusted.

Anxiety says,

You can't vote that way and still be a Christian.

Anxiety says,

All these bad branches out there are going to kill the vine.

But Anxiety lies. It lies all the time.

Jesus says,

I am the vine, you are the branches.

If Jesus is the vine, it's not that easy to kill.

The most powerful Empire on earth tried to kill Jesus,

Thought they succeeded,

And were embarrassed by the power and glory of God.

As our Psalm 22 passage says,

Dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.

To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down;

Before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,

And I shall live for Him.



When I read about those who sleep in the earth,  
Those who go down to the dust,  
I think about all those grapevines,  
Cut down and burned into ash.

The reality of our lives as humans is that  
Our existence is much like the grapevine's branches.

We live and love and work and pray and sing  
And hurt and cry and laugh and birth and break and eat  
And hope to bear good fruit before the Lord.

And in the end, like those branches,

We are cut down from this life,

We sleep in the earth,

We go down in the dust,

And if we're lucky, if we've been fruitful,

A little piece of us abides in the vine,

Our legacy to carry next year's growth.

When grapevines are pruned correctly,

Cut down to only a piece of last year's growth,

The plant puts more energy into producing flowers and fruits,

And less into winding branches.

The goal is a balance between fruit and photosynthesis,  
Just enough branch will grow to support the number of fruit

That its leaves can feed with their energy.

To get a grapevine functioning in this balanced way,

To get it to produce the best quality of fruit,

Can take years of work, even decades.

A person planting a brand new vineyard,

Whether today or in Jesus' time,  
Was performing an act of generational service.  
Planting a vineyard is an act one does for one's children and grandchildren,  
Not for one's self.  
It takes that long for the vines to establish themselves and be trained,  
Years of pruning to find the perfect balance of sun and sugar.  
Grow, harvest, cut.  
Grow, harvest, cut.  
Birth, life, dust.  
Birth, life, dust.  
Posterity will serve him; future generations will be told about the Lord  
And proclaim his deliverance  
To a people yet unborn,  
Saying that he has done it.  
In every generation of Christian people,  
Mistakes will be made.  
As US Christians we live with the legacy of previous generations.  
Those previous branches look ugly to us today.  
Branches that tolerated slavery, branches that settled Indian land,  
Branches that wouldn't ordain women,  
Branches who practiced exclusion and humiliation,  
Remember that these ugly branches were as real as ours,  
But we are not the vinegrower.  
God knows which branch bears fruit, and which does not.  
Each branch before us, fruitful or not, has been cut down,  
Leaving only those parts that abide in Jesus, the true vine.  
We may be growing out of some ugly history,

But we are not defined by those past branches.

We abide in Jesus, and we will bear good fruit.

One day we, too, will be cut down,

Good or bad, fruitful or unfruitful.

We will sleep in the earth,

And go down to the dust.

And all the while, we will proclaim God's deliverance

To a people yet unborn.

Amen.