

“Real Sustenance” – John 15:1-8

Well, isn't it super that we're getting a bit of sunshine on a weekend?! Yesterday started out with a bit of rain, but by the afternoon the sun was shining on the North Shore and it actually started to feel a bit like Summer. And to reinforce that feeling, along with the sunshine came the inevitable sounds of lawn mowers, hedge trimmers, weed-whackers, and leaf blowers as people all over our neighbourhood emerged from their rain shelters and attacked the flora that had been quietly but inexorably growing, and growing, and growing. And me? I was in the backyard chopping up hoses and removing fittings from tanks I had removed from the boat last Fall and which have been looking ugly all Winter, getting them ready to head to the recycling depot.

In the midst of all that hacking and trimming and pruning I couldn't help but think of the passage for today from John's gospel. I'd say it was the constant need for pruning and trimming here on the West Coast that makes us jump immediately to focus upon the pruning and trimming and hacking and chopping in this gospel text, but I know that people everywhere tend to do the same thing. We read a few short verses like this, and shudder, and turn away feeling that if we dig too deep into it we're going to get hurt by all that slashing.

Jesus begins here with “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” a declaration that rings with some familiarity in our ears. “I am the door ...”, “I am the good shepherd ...”, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” And so as we enter into this discussion of vines, and fruit, and pruning the discussion begins with yet one more affirmation, this time from the risen Jesus, of his unbounded life-giving gift to us. Given that opening solidarity, instead of trembling in fear, or turning away, can we take that affirmation of solid support as the foundation and basis for how we read and hear the rest of the saying? When we do that, when we face this saying with Christ holding our hand, we are able to hear not only another powerful affirmation but also an everlasting promise of ongoing sustenance and support.

We often get put off right after Jesus' opening statement, with the first fearful declaration that the Father removes every branch that bears no fruit, and fearing that we may be the ones who get lopped off miss the immediately following more positive affirmation that those branches that do bear fruit are pruned. Maybe it's our fear of even being pruned, never mind being removed, that causes us to usually go no further here, which is hugely too bad because when we drop out here we miss the powerful affirmation.

That affirmation? “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.” We've already been pruned, which is what the word cleansed means here. Stop for a moment and think about it. We've just had a warning that those branches that do not bear fruit are removed, and those that do are pruned, and are told that we are already pruned. The implication is clear – we are branches that are bearing fruit ... we are NOT about to be removed. And to make that distinction even clearer, the words in the original Greek are quite different that express the two actions. The removing of branches is done with the verb ‘airei, which has all the implications of chopping off, gathering up, sweeping away, and carting off to the dump. By contrast, the word used for pruning is katharoi, which is the same root as the word we know as catharsis, or cleansing. Two quite different implications – the first emphasises the cuttings that are gone, gone, gone ... but the second, referring to us, emphasises the new, improved version that remains. Vastly different perspectives, aren't they, and the important part is that we are the ones cleansed by the word that Christ has spoken to us, and that we have heard, and to which we have responded.

And that leads us from the powerfully positive affirmation into the eternal and life-giving promise that follows, “Abide in me as I abide in you ... those who abide in me and I in them bear

much fruit.” But what does Jesus mean by “abide in me”? That theme of abiding is a constant and frequent one throughout John’s gospel, so much so that it becomes a parallel to believing, both pointing to a life in Christ ... not in some future afterlife but right here and right now. You may recall that Jesus opened his discussions about his coming passion with his pronouncement of preparing dwelling places for us. The word for dwelling has the same root as the word for abide, and here the risen Christ again uses abiding, having already fulfilled his promise to come again and be with his followers.

And so we have this wonderful composite image of healthy, well-trimmed branches firmly attached to the life-giving vine, being sustained by the nutrition provided by that vine, abiding and living fruitfully. That image brings forth (yes, as in bears) all kinds of other understandings as well. For example, the related concepts of relationships and community. Just as a lone, struggling, wanna-be-vine branch has little chance of ever bearing fruit, so too it is those branches that are firmly attached to a healthy, well-rooted and carefully-tended vine that will blossom, and flourish, and grow, and produce.

But we need to remember that a powerful vine carries many, many branches. The image Jesus puts before us is not one of a “Jesus and me” isolation ... the image he evokes is one of “Jesus and all of us together.” We are part of a community, a faith community, tied together by the life we receive from Jesus and the care and tending we receive from God. It is in relationship both with Jesus and with each other that we are truly nourished, truly receive real sustenance, and truly abide forever. The life we receive from our attachment to Jesus enables us to last, to persist, to endure, to continue in community and fellowship both with him and with each other.

And that leads us into another key understanding offered by Jesus in this collage of images from the vineyard, the understanding about bearing fruit. When Jesus calls us to be branches firmly attached to the vine of life – to him – he is not proposing that we simply latch on like suckers or leeches to draw life from him. This whole message is about taking the sustenance from the vine that he offers and putting it to good use – bearing fruit. To make it even a bit clearer, the word fruit here is not so much the idea of shiny objects hanging on us like decorations on a Christmas tree as the concept of creating results, outcomes, and even more so deeds. The notion of bearing fruit here is clearly about action, activity, about doing, about causing things to happen ... it’s not about looking pretty, it’s about reaching out, helping others, proclaiming the word, welcoming strangers, uplifting the downtrodden, supporting each other, contributing to our community.

The result of all this activity? “My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be[come] my disciples.” Another image, this time of a grizzled old master of the vineyard, standing back and viewing his fields and vines with great satisfaction, seeing healthy branches pulsing with life, nurtured and sustained by their vine, reaching out into the glorious sunshine, and producing delicious and abundant fruit. A pastoral picture, pleasant and pleasing, reflecting the love and care that the Father has for the Son, and for each one of us, people who have already been cleansed by the Word of God.

So take heart ... fear not ... hear this passage and be affirmed. You are one of the branches sustained by the life-giving vine that is Christ, and as we continue to abide in him we have the assurance that he will continue to abide in us, nurturing and sustaining and helping us in the company of all other believers to bear fruit and glorify God.