

CONNECTED

John 15: 1-8

Broadview Community United Church of Christ
May 14, 2006

Rev. Gail Crouch

JESUS SAID, "I AM THE TRUE VINE AND GOD IS THE GARDENER.....I AM THE VINE AND YOU ARE THE BRANCHES. IF PEOPLE ABIDE IN ME AND I IN THEM, THEY WILL BEAR MUCH FRUIT."

THIS IMAGE OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE HAS BEEN USED OVER THE CENTURIES IN MANY DIFFERENT WAYS. OFTEN, SERMONS HAVE EMPHASIZED THE FRUITFULNESS ASPECT – UNLESS WE DELIVER, WE ARE NOT FAITHFUL CHRISTIANS. BUT I WANT TO TALK TODAY ABOUT ANOTHER WAY OF LOOKING AT THIS IMAGE JESUS USES. I WANT TO TALK ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO BE A CHURCH AND HOW OUR FRUITFULNESS IS ENHANCED IN COMMUNITY

WE HAVE A LARGE CLEMATIS PLANT THAT GROWS ALL ACROSS THE BACK OF OUR HOUSE AROUND A GATE AND DOWN THE LENGTH OF THE GARAGE. ALL FIFTY FEET OF THIS PLANT IS SUPPORTED BY TWO RELATIVELY SMALL VINES. IT HAS ALWAYS AMAZED ME THAT THESE TWO SLENDER STALKS SUPPORT SO MANY LEAVES AND BRANCHES. IN THE SPRING WHEN THE PLANT IS BLOOMING, THE FRAGRANCE AND SIGHTS ARE WONDERFUL. IF I LOOK AT MY CLEMATIS AND THINK OF THIS SCRIPTURAL IMAGE OF JESUS AS THE VINE AND ALL OF US AS THE BRANCHES, THE IMAGE IS VERY DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS I HAVE SEEN.

FOR OFTEN THE ILLUSTRATION OF THIS SCRIPTURE IS A STRONG OAK TREE WITH ONE LARGE TRUNK AND DISTINCT, STURDY BRANCHES. ONE CAN ENVISION JESUS AS THAT TRUNK AND EACH OF US BEING FED AND NURTURED AS WE GROW STRONG AND SUPPORT LEAVES. AND IF PRUNING IS NEEDED, IT IS EASY TO IDENTIFY AND CUT OFF A BRANCH.

BUT THE CLEMATIS BRANCHES ARE SO PROFUSE AND TANGLED AND HEAVILY LEAF CLAD THAT IT IS ALMOST IMPOSSIBLE TO TELL WHERE ONE ENDS AND THE NEXT ONE BEGINS. CUTTING OUT A DYING BRANCH IS RISKY BECAUSE I MAY ALSO BE PRUNING OFF PART OF A HEALTHY BRANCH. MY CLEMATIS AS AN ILLUSTRATION OF THE VINE AND BRANCHES METAPHOR OF JESUS, PRESENTS A PICTURE OF A RADICALLY NON-HIERARCHICAL VIEW OF THE CHURCH. WE, ALL OF US TOGETHER, A TANGLED INDISTINGUISHABLE MASS, HAVE ONLY ONE PURPOSE – TO PRODUCE FRUIT. NO BRANCH STANDS OUT AS ANY MORE IMPORTANT THAN ANY OTHER. WE'RE JUST ALL TANGLED UP TOGETHER AND HOPEFULLY PRODUCING FRUIT. IF WE ARE THE BRANCHES AND JESUS IS THE VINE WITH GOD THE GARDENER, THEN WE ARE ALL ALIKE AND WE ARE ALL NECESSARY. IT IS NOT A QUESTION OF WHO IS MORE USEFUL OR

IMPORTANT OR SIGNIFICANT. THERE IS NO BASIS FOR DIVISION OR PRIDE. THERE ARE NOT THE MUSICAL AND UNMUSICAL; THE BIG GIVERS AND THOSE WHO CAN ONLY PLEDGE A SMALL AMOUNT; THE HIGHLY EDUCATED AND THOSE WHO HAVE LESS SCHOOLING; THE FAITH-FILLED AND THE DOUBTERS. WE ARE ALL PART OF THE SAME PLANT AND OUR BRANCHES ARE ROOTED IN OUR WILLINGNESS TO STAY CONNECTED TO THE VINE THAT IS JESUS, TO BE NOURISHED AND SUSTAINED BY HIS LOVE.

SO WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE FRUITFUL? OTHER SCRIPTURES TELL US WHAT IT MEANS TO BE FRUITFUL FOR GOD. THE APOSTLE PAUL LISTS THE FRUITS OF THE SPIRIT AS: LOVE, JOY, PEACE, PATIENCE, KINDNESS GENEROSITY, FAITHFULNESS, GENTLENESS AND SELF-CONTROL. THAT SEEMS LIKE AN ENDLESS AND IMPOSSIBLE LIST! I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT THERE ARE LOTS OF DAYS WHEN MY PATIENCE AND SELF-CONTROL DISAPPEAR RAPIDLY, AS I DEAL WITH DIFFICULT TRAFFIC, DIFFICULT PEOPLE, AND DIFFICULT SITUATIONS. IF THE ONLY WAY I AM FRUITFUL IS TO PERFECTLY FOLLOW THIS LIST, I AM SURE TO BE PRUNED OUT OF THE VINE VERY SOON!

BUT THIS METAPHOR OF THE VINE AND BRANCHES HAS SOME OTHER IMPORTANT WORDS IN IT: JESUS SAYS, "ABIDE IN ME AS I ABIDE IN YOU." ABIDING IS ABOUT RELATIONSHIP. FRUITFULNESS IS A NATURAL RESULT OF DEVELOPING A RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS, OF DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH EACH OTHER IN THE CHURCH.

JESUS DOES NOT SAY, "THOSE WHO WORK ENDLESSLY TO BE PEACEFUL, GENTLE, PATIENT, SELF-CONTROLLED, ALWAYS LOVING WILL BE FRUITFUL. HE DOES SAY THAT THOSE WHO STAY IN RELATIONSHIP WITH HIM, WHO STAY IN RELATIONSHIP WITH EACH OTHER, WILL BE FRUITFUL, THAT THOSE CONNECTIONS WILL FEED US.

WHEN I LOOK AT MY LARGE CLEMATIS, I KNOW THAT THE BRANCHES, THROUGH THEIR LEAVES RECEIVE ENERGY FROM THE SUN TO FUEL THEIR GROWTH. AND THAT THE BRANCHES RECEIVE MOISTURE AND NUTRIENTS THROUGH THE VINE FROM THE SOIL. ONLY WHEN THE FEEDING FROM THE VINE AND THE ENERGY FROM THE SUN FLOW INTO THE BRANCHES DO THEY BEAR FRUIT. IF WE STRENGTHEN OUR CONNECTION TO JESUS, GRAFT OURSELVES FIRMLY TO THE VINE, WE WILL BE FRUITFUL. HOLDING CLOSE IN RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AND EACH OTHER ENCOURAGES US TO BEAR THAT FRUIT OF LOVE, GENTLENESS, COMPASSION AND CARE.

SO HOW DOES IT WORK IN THE CHURCH? WHAT DOES IT MEAN FOR US AS A CONGREGATION?

I HAVE JUST RETURNED FROM OUR UCC PACIFIC NORTHWEST CONFERENCE ANNUAL MEETING IN YAKIMA. I HEARD INSPIRING SPEAKERS, ATTENDED HELPFUL WORKSHOPS, LEARNED A NUMBER OF THINGS. BUT MOST OF ALL, I WATCHED AND EXPERIENCED AS ALL OF US CONNECTED WITH EACH OTHER. FARMERS FROM RITZVILLE AND BANKERS FROM SEATTLE; LOGGERS FROM METALINE FALLS AND FISHERMEN FROM BLAINE, ALL SAT TOGETHER, SEEKING TO BE RENEWED IN OUR FAITH, IN OUR UNDERSTANDING OF WHAT IT MEANS TO BE THE UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST IN THIS PLACE AND TIME. IT WAS WHILE WE STUDIED AND PRAYED AND LAUGHED AND ATE TOGETHER THAT WE RECEIVED THE NOURISHMENT OF BEING CONNECTED TO THE VINE THAT IS THE UCC, TO THE VINE THAT IS JESUS. IT WAS OUR WILLINGNESS TO TELL AND LISTEN TO STORIES, TO PRAY FOR EACH OTHER, TO BE CHALLENGED TO DO JUSTICE WORK THAT LED US TO UNDERSTAND WHAT IT MEANS TO BE CONNECTED. RURAL AND URBAN, YOUNG AND OLD, GAY AND STRAIGHT, LIBERAL AND CONSERVATIVE, MARRIED, DIVORCED, WIDOWED, OR SINGLE, IN ALL THAT DIFFERENCE, DIVERSE BRANCHES CAME TOGETHER, NOURISHED BY A SINGLE VINE. THERE WAS A SENSE THAT JOYFULNESS WAS OUR ROOT AND UNITY OUR FOLIAGE.

DURING HER SERMON, KRISTINE ZAKARISON, THE PASTOR IN PULLMAN, ASKED THE QUESTION: "WHAT IS THE CHURCH OF YOUR HEART AND WHY?" AS I SHARED WITH THOSE CLOSEST TO ME, I SAID THAT THE UCC WAS CLEARLY THE CHURCH OF MY HEART BECAUSE I FERVENTLY BELIEVE THAT WE MODEL THE INCLUSIVE, WELCOMING, OPEN LOVE OF JESUS AS WELL OR BETTER THAN ANY CHURCH I KNOW. AS MEMBERS OF THE UCC, WE ARE ASKED TO WITNESS TO THE INCLUSIVE LOVE OF GOD WHICH MEANS WE NOT ONLY BELIEVE EVERYONE IS LOVED BUT WE ARE CALLED TO BE JUSTICE MAKERS AND ASSURE EVERYONE KNOWS AND FEELS THAT LOVE. WE KNOW OUR SOURCE OF STRENGTH COMES WHEN WE FEEL ROOTED IN CHRIST. BUT IT IS A COMMITMENT THAT NEEDS TO BE CONSTANTLY RENEWED.

BEING A BRANCH CONNECTED TO OTHERS BRINGS US SOME RESPONSIBILITY. WE EITHER BEAR FRUIT TOGETHER OR WE DON'T. THIS IMAGE WAS NOT GIVEN TO A COMMUNITY AT REST THAT HAD SETTLED IN FOR BUSINESS AS USUAL. JESUS KNEW THAT THOSE LEFT AFTER HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION WOULD EXPERIENCE SOME DIFFICULT TIMES AS THEY TRIED TO LIVE A LIFE OF LOVE AND CHALLENGE THE STATUS QUO. THIS IMAGE OF THE VINE AND BRANCHES IS GIVEN TO COMMUNITIES ENGAGED IN SERVICE, WHOSE DISTINCTIVENESS FROM THE WORLD SOMETIMES CALLS THEM TO MAKE RISKY DECISIONS. BUT, SAYS JESUS, YOU CAN RISK, AND DO BOLD WORK BECAUSE I ABIDE IN YOU AS YOU DO IN ME.

THIS CONGREGATION HAS A GRANT FROM THE UCC FOR RENEWAL WORK. THERE ARE NUMEROUS PIECES TO IT AND SOME OF THEM HAVE BEGUN. UNDER JEFF STILWELL'S FAITHFUL GUIDANCE, SUNDAY NIGHT AT BROADVIEW, OUR MOVIE NIGHT, IS BEGINNING TO ATTRACT SOME VISITORS WHO HOPEFULLY WILL BECOME MORE INTERESTED IN THE CHURCH ITSELF. AN OUTREACH TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD HAS BEGUN – ACTUALLY VISITING HOMES AND INVITING PEOPLE TO THE MOVIE NIGHTS AND TO LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CHURCH IF THEY SEEM INTERESTED.

GOING DOOR TO DOOR SOUNDS SCARY TO SOME FOLKS. WE OFTEN FEEL UNSURE ABOUT HOW TO DO THIS AND WE CERTAINLY DON'T WANT TO BE MISTAKEN FOR JEHOVAH'S WITNESSES! BUT WE HAVE A SPECIAL KIND OF PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANITY WE PRACTICE HERE AND I BELIEVE THERE IS A DEEP HUNGER FOR THAT IS OUR COMMUNITY. AND YOU DON'T GO ALONE – YOU ARE CONNECTED TO THE VINE THAT IS BROADVIEW UCC. I ENCOURAGE MORE OF YOU TO TALK WITH JEFF AND OTHERS ON THE RENEWAL COMMITTEE TO SEE HOW YOU TOO CAN BE THE VOICE OF INCLUSIVE LOVE AND COMPASSION IN OUR COMMUNITY.

THERE IS ALWAYS RISK IN SAYING YES TO OPPORTUNITIES; SAYING YES TO THE FUTURE, SAYING YES AS A COMMUNITY OF FAITH. BUT OUR BUILDING STANDS TODAY BECAUSE OTHERS TOOK RISKS MANY YEARS AGO. THEY ARE PART OF THE VINE, PART OF OUR COMMUNITY.

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THERE IS ONE MORE DIFFICULT PART OF THE IMAGE OF THE VINE AND BRANCHES. JESUS CLEARLY SAYS GOD WILL REMOVE BRANCHES THAT BEAR NO FRUIT AND PRUNE ALL BRANCHES TO BEAR EVEN MORE. PRUNING IS SOMETIMES PAINFUL WORK, IT MAKES US NERVOUS.

AT OUR HOUSE, I USUALLY PRUNE THE ROSES AND ED PRUNES THE FRUIT TREES. AND EVERY YEAR WE HAVE THE SAME CONVERSATIONS: "ARE YOU SURE YOU ARE NOT CUTTING OFF TOO MUCH? IT LOOKS PRETTY SEVERE TO ME!" WE KNOW, OF COURSE, THAT WE WILL HAVE MORE AND LARGER ROSES OR APPLES BECAUSE WE HAVE PRUNED, THAT THE SHAPE OF THE TREES AND BUSHES WILL BE MORE AESTHETIC. BUT IT STILL TENDS TO BE DIFFICULT.

WE DON'T LIKE THE IDEA OF GOD PRUNING OUR LIVES. IT FEELS LIKE REJECTION, LIKE WE'RE BEING THROWN AWAY. BUT EACH OF US PROBABLY NEEDS PRUNING IN SOME WAY. WHAT NEEDS TO BE CHANGED IN YOUR LIFE IN ORDER FOR YOU TO BE MORE FRUITFUL – MORE LOVING AND COMPASSIONATE? DO YOU NEED TO PRUNE OUT ACTIVITIES, CHANGE FROM FRANTICALLY RACING FROM ONE EVENT TO ANOTHER LEAVING NO TIME TO SIMPLY "ABIDE"? IS THERE SOME DESTRUCTIVE

HABIT THAT IF PRUNED FROM YOUR LIFE WOULD MAKE YOU HEALTHIER?
HONESTY DEMANDS THE REALIZATION THAT ALL OF US CAN USE
PRUNING FROM TIME TO TIME.

BUT PRUNING IS NOT JUST CUTTING OUT AND THROWING AWAY, IT ALSO
MEANS CHANGING OR RESHAPING A PLANT. OUR CHURCH COMMUNITY
CAN PERFORM THAT FUNCTION OF PRUNING FOR US. PART OF WHY WE
COME TO CHURCH AT ALL IS TO BE TRANSFORMED – TO BE CHANGED. A
COMMUNITY, WORKING TOGETHER TO BE THE HANDS AND FEET OF
CHRIST IN THE WORLD, MAY OPEN US ALL TO NEW WAYS OF BEING AND
DOING. WE DO CHANGE EACH OTHER – BY OUR PRAYERS, OUR EXAMPLES,
AND OUR OPENNESS TO THE HOLY SPIRIT.

PRUNING MAY BE GENTLE OR IN SOME CASES, HARSH. WHEN PAINFUL
LIFE EXPERIENCES COME TO US – THE LOSS OF A SPOUSE OR PARTNER,
SEVERE ILLNESS, FINANCIAL DIFFICULTIES – IT FEELS LIKE SEVERE
PRUNING. BUT BEING WILLING TO ABIDE IN THIS COMMUNITY, TO ABIDE
IN JESUS, CAN GIVE US THE STRENGTH TO SURVIVE THAT INITIAL SHOCK,
AND FIND NEW WAYS OF BEING. EVEN THE MOST DEVASTING OF LOSSES
CAN PRODUCE A NEW KIND OF FRUITFULNESS.

I FIND IT DIFFICULT TO ABIDE IN THE IMAGE OF A GOD WHO IS “UP ABOVE
OR OUT THERE.” BUT WHEN I LOOK AT MY CLEMATIS, I SEE THOSE
SLENDER VINES SUPPORTING SO MANY, MANY BRANCHES AND I KNOW
GOD IS PRESENT THERE. THAT DIVINE LOVE IS BENEATH US, RISING UP TO
HOLD US AND NURTURE US. SUPPORTED BY THAT LOVE, I AM CONTENT
TO ABIDE IN THAT VINE, KNOWING THAT WITH ALL OF YOU, GOD CALLS
US TO A FRUITFULNESS THAT IS POSSIBLE, BECAUSE WE ARE FIRST
LOVED. WE DO NOT HAVE TO EARN THIS LOVE – IT IS GRACE – THE GRACE
OF A LOVING GOD WHO IS ALWAYS THERE TO SUSTAIN US HOWEVER
DIFFICULT THE DECISIONS WE ARE CALLED TO MAKE; HOWEVER DEEP
THE PRUNING MAY BE, MAY WE KNOW WE ARE TENDED TO BY GOD AND
WE ARE SURROUNDED, ON EVERY SIDE, BY THAT HOLY GRACE.

AND WHEN THE PRUNING IS FINISHED AND WE BEGIN TO BEAR NEW AND
HEALTHIER FRUIT, WE KNOW THAT WE ARE FED BY THE VINE, ROOTED
DEEP IN THE ONGOING PRESENCE OF JESUS AND SUSTAINED ALWAYS BY
OUR LOVING GOD. AMEN.

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