

Call to Worship

Jesus expects us to bear good fruit.

In order for us to be fruitful, God not only keeps close to us and abides with us, but also works with us to ensure that we bear fruit in Jesus' name.

Prayer of Invocation

The morning has broken, Lord. Once more your miracle of time has granted us another opportunity to praise your name, not in word and song only, but through our thoughts and actions. As this day unfolds may we read clearly in each other's faces, in the traces of your majesty in this beautiful world, in the gift of your guidance that graces our actions that you are here! May we feel your presence strongly as we go forth from this place, to share the good news of your salvation, not only for us, but for the whole world. These things we pray in your mighty name! Amen.

The Word

John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. **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. 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.**

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.**

Living the Word

As winter turns to spring and we see the new growth on all the tips of the pine tree branches, we are reminded that unless we are growing, we are dying. Of course in all of life there are times to be growing and times to be dying. In fact parts of us, our knowledge and experience may be growing as our bodies are continuing to fade and fail.

In the scripture today, Jesus is talking about growing in knowledge and experience: receiving more of life, by reaching beyond ourselves, while staying attached to the source of life. Nothing can bear fruit in the wrong climate, the wrong environment or without the correct nourishment. Most of the naturally grown fruit does quite well with what it receives from nature, sometimes with a little extra nurturing from us.

Then the fruit comes: apples and oranges there for the picking. We cannot expect grapes from an apple tree, or apricots from an orange tree, yet somehow when it comes to what we as humans will produce, our expectations get all askew. We expect all students to get 'A's, all young adults to want what we wanted as young adults, all middle agers to work only for accumulated wealth. Then when they fail to meet requirements, we are sure they have failed.

Thank heavens; God doesn't do the same for us. God does give us expectations, encouraging us to bear fruit, but not requirements of what has to be the end product. God knows we have a difficult time even reaching expectations, but God keeps giving second and third chances for us to bear some kind of fruit in our lives.

The Church is something we are a part of. As with vines and branches, the church is a living, growing thing. Church is about relationships and cooperation, it is not just a building. The building does make it possible for

us to come together, but we don't exist as a group for the building; we don't come together just to make the building possible.

The building is here to make our relationships and cooperation possible. There needs to be signs of life everywhere or the church is dead. We did an interesting activity in the Lay Speaking class when I taught it a few years ago: It is called a Service Tour of the church. Room by room we did a mental tour of the visible and invisible service that people do in each room. It is a great exercise to process how many people are helping make ministry happen within and through a church.

We don't have time to do walk through our rooms right now, but just look around the sanctuary and begin your list. Ushers, greeters, organists, choir director, liturgists, and choir; all easy to acknowledge as we see them. But have you ever thought about who it is that folds your bulletin each week, or who it is that straightens the pews each week, or who it is that prepares the elements for Holy Communion? Who did I miss?

Those who get the service on power point and the one who changes the slides at always the right time... The ones who makes sure that there are appropriate banners for the season and arrange a display on the worship table week after week. The money counters who stay after fellowship to do their work, well maybe that goes with another room, but someone takes the money to the bank each week, or before that someone collects the offering plates from here. Well, you get the idea.

There are so many who serve you each week. Each piece of fruit that they offer is a gift from their heart because they are servants. You might argue that some of them get paid in money rather than blessings. Oh, you mean the staff: Let me tell you, this staff isn't in this for the money. I have been thinking about our few staff: organists and secretary. They are only seen here for a short time, yet they are working beyond these doors, because this is their church.

I can say about each of them that they have no line between the job and their service to God.' They are all great examples to everyone around them. They serve for God, and are blessed in the fruits of their labors, not for the sake of the job, yet for their own sakes, as they know how important it is to stay connected. When you live into the fruits of your labor you are blessed by blessing others. Don't serve for the church, serve for God, serve for yourself. Serve to bless and receive the blessing.

Bearing fruit grows from being a part of Christ. Finding a home in him and letting his word find a home in us through faithful dedication, can bring us great joy in our lives. When we stay close and in tune with Jesus, it is realized that what we want is in line with what God wants. Verse 7 says *"If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."* God wants us to be blessed, but we have to live into the blessings.

Jesus invited his disciples to trust him. We have to find and hold that same trust. The scriptures lay it out in this way for us: Matthew 11:28-30 *"Bring your burdens to me; I will give you rest."* And Matthew 20:26-28 *"Whoever wishes to be great must serve."* If you will do this, I promise this.

Nancy Blakely, Hospice Chaplain in Pelzer, South Carolina shares this: *"Reassurance comes from remaining close to Jesus, weathering whatever storms may come. Rather than sounding a note of despair, Jesus speaks a word of hope and trust for their souls."*

In Eugene Peterson's Bible translation he uses the words: *"Live in me, Make your home in me just as I do in you."* Home is meant as a place of belonging, a place of peace. A fire is burning on the hearth, the smell of fresh baked bread, a cozy chair and a blanket, and Jesus' love.

When someone is having a hard time, we often tell them to 'hang in there, be strong, things should get better.' But that isn't a great help to someone who is just hanging on by their fingertips. Difficulties do come in life, but by already dwelling with Christ, we can bear up better in the storms. We are more prepared to 'hang in there' when we know we are never alone.

Shalom is the Hebrew word for Peace, but it has a much deeper meaning than just that. "Shalom" is used to both greet people and to bid them farewell, and it means much more than "peace, hello or goodbye"...Hebrew words go beyond their spoken pronunciation. Each Hebrew word conveys feeling, intent and emotion. Shalom is more than just simply peace; it is a complete peace.

According to Strong's Concordance, Shalom means completeness, wholeness, health, peace, welfare, safety, soundness, tranquility, prosperity, perfectness, fullness, rest, harmony, the absence of agitation or discord. Shalom comes from the root verb meaning to be complete, perfect and full. Of course, one way to find TRUE shalom - is to live connected to God through Christ.

We all yearn for shalom in our lives. It enables us to be able to speak of healing when there is no hope for a cure. Hope for relief from suffering, hope for new life beyond death. Like a lifeline thrown out to someone who is drowning, we reach shalom through staying connected to our source and sharing ourselves with others.

Being Pruned. That doesn't sound like fun...Still, we all can use some trimming and pruning. In life our fruit growing abilities change and there are times to trim back what we used to do and grow new vines in a new direction. We serve according to our need to share, but also for the good of the whole community.

There are two ways to be heavily pruned: When you break yourself off of the branch and go it alone. We know that isn't productive; or by being cut off when we can't allow ourselves to grow and we stunt those around us by holding ourselves and others back from production. Staying connected in a healthy growing way keeps you growing with the community. In the vineyard, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine. That is where the most nourishment is focused.

Left alone, vines which are thick trailing plants will attach themselves to other things, and will grow out of control, resulting in a big tangled mess. That is why the later branches and those that grow out wild are pruned and kept short and a vine grower or vine dresser is needed to keep the vines in order.

As God offers us free will choice, when it comes to these two choices, the old saying is true: "You pays your money and you takes your choices." Each person has to make their own decisions in a situation, because no decision is more correct than any other if there were only these two to choose from. Yet if you let God lead you in your choice making and you are connected enough to God, you will always have a better choice: to stay connected and grow with Christ.

At the baptism of the children, we all, the community of God, agree to help raise them connected to Christ. We try to closely connect the children to God through Jesus. If there is 'growth energy' for them, they will want to come and they will want to stay. As children cannot drive themselves here to church, they come only if someone brings them.

Adults have more choice, as most of us can figure a way to get here to stay connected, but we also have more hang-ups than the children. We are taught to be independent and we have to let go of some of that to stay connected. Sometimes we get hurt and it is difficult to begin to trust again. It takes some risk to reconnect when you have been cut off.

We can't force anyone, you have to decide for yourself. Is this just where you always come on Sunday mornings or is this where you come just on Sunday mornings only or are you a part of something bigger? Is your life fruitful, are you trying to have a servant heart or do you live only for yourself and your needs?

If someone walks through the door for worship, and they are greeted, and then we raise our voices together in song, and they hear each other's joys and concerns and are given someone to pray for in the next week besides their own list, then they are offered a taste of the banquet Christ shares with all present through Holy Communion, and given an opportunity to invest in God's future work, by sharing their gifts.

If all of this can happen in just one hour, just in this room and they can connect in some way to Christ through any of it, they can begin to be a part of all that God has to offer. And if they pay attention before and after they are in this room, they may find coffee and food, greeters, choir practicing, casual conversations, and sometimes children laughing or crying.

This church is alive! It is connected: vine to branch, because it knows the source of its nourishment. It is not about the building, though the building is nice, it is because of you and you and you; all connected to the source and still growing. If we hear God's voice inviting us to love one another through our prayers, presence, gifts, service and witness and we are always becoming a growing new source of that love, then people will want to be here.

Jesus said *"Love one another as I have loved you..."* I invite you to pray this week for God to send the names of the people around you who need to get connected or to re-connect. When you have a name – pray for the courage to invite them to church.

There is a children's song that is like a growing vine, it goes like this: *"Love is something if you give it away, give it away, give it away. Love is something if you give it away you end up having more. IT's just like a magic penny – hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it spend it and you'll have so many – they roll all over the floor, for, Love is something if you give it away you end up having more."*