

"Stick House"

First in a Lent series on John 15

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John 15:1-8

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How productive were you this week? How fruitful? Did you get stuff done? As much as you wanted to? Needed to? Was it enough?

I suffered a concussion a couple weeks ago. I'm doing much better now, but for a few days I wasn't able to do much at all. Want to know something good about those few days? I wasn't able to do much at all. No one expected me to. I didn't expect me to. It wasn't pleasant, but it was without pressure. Pressure to perform. Pressure to produce. Pressure to be fruitful.

Now I'm back to reasonably normal, and the pressure is back too. Get it all done! I never do.

That's my story. What's yours?

Are you fruitful? Day-in and day-out, fruitful?

Maybe at one time you were very fruitful. But now, for whatever reasons, not so much. Or, maybe you look back, and think you could have done so much more, should have done more, should have been more.

Along comes Jesus, and he talks about "bearing fruit." More pressure?

Or, maybe he's got good news for us.

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I am the real vine and my Father is the vine grower. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he cuts back to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cut back by the word I have spoken to you.

Stick with me, as I stick with you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it sticks with the vine, neither can you unless you stick with me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who stick with me and I with them bear much fruit, because apart from me you cannot do anything. Whoever does not stick with me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you stick with me, and my words stick with 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.*¹

III

It's Jesus' last night with his closest disciples. Within hours he'll be betrayed, abandoned, arrested, denounced, condemned, tortured, and executed. He knows this. He's getting them ready. He's getting us ready.

Jesus has washed his disciples' feet, that act of the lowliest carried out by our Lord. He's told us to act for one another with that same attitude: service and self-giving.

Now he is talking. He's already said a bunch. We're jumping in mid-conversation. He is saying goodbye to them and us . . . but not really. He is comforting them and us . . . but not only. He is sending them and us, giving us marching orders for our mission . . . and he'll be on mission with us.

You see, it doesn't end with Jesus, because he does not end. (We'll get a pretty strong sign of that on Easter morning). We are with him. We can be more with Jesus after his death and resurrection, than they were right then, in that room, eating from the same bowl.

Get this. We can be more fruitful than they were. More even than Jesus was! He said so.² Yes, that's you! More fruitful than Jesus. You! Us!

Now do you feel pressure?

Don't! Think about where you are living. A vine.

IV

"I am the vine," says Jesus.

A vine. A plant that spreads out stems. They call them "runners," though they don't. They crawl over-ground, or climb up trees, walls, and things like that. Many plants work this way, like grapes, ivy, and pumpkins.

¹ I've adapted the NRSV translation.

² Earlier in the same conversation, Jesus said, "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I say to you I do not speak on my own; but the Father who dwells in me does his works. Believe me that I am in the Father and the Father is in me; but if you do not, then believe me because of the works themselves. Very truly, I tell you, *the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father.* I will do whatever you ask in my name, so that the Father may be glorified in the Son. If in my name you ask me for anything, I will do it." (John 14:10-14, emphasis added)

In the Jewish Scriptures, Israel often gets compared to a vineyard.³ The community of God's People is planted, tended by God, growing so it produces wonderful wine. Except, it turns out they are like us. This vine-image always gets used when things have gone wrong. God's People grow unfaithful from God, and turn against God's ways. The Vine abandons its identity and mission. No more fruit.⁴

But now Jesus says, "*I am the real vine.*" All the identity and mission of God's People, Jesus wraps into himself. He is true, he is right, he is authentic and good. All that we are made to be, Jesus is.⁵

We are his branches. This community he is creating, all of us disciples together, we are part of him. This connection between us and Jesus is organic, intimate, and deeply personal. We are who we are, with him.

So we can produce fruit. Is the pressure on?

V

Imagine I'm holding a vine branch here. We need it to grow fruit. How do we do that?

Commitment! Are you all committed, 100%, to this vine branch making fruit? Yes! Will you give it your best effort? Yes!

We're all going to give more: more time, more passion, more money, more of our talents and abilities. I know we can all count on you.

If you're part of the congregation's leadership team, we're going to need you to put in extra time: more meetings, more reading. You in for that? Of course you are! You are awesome.

Our artists are going to make some wonderful vine-fruit artwork, choreograph a special vine-fruit dance, compose and perform a breathtaking vine-fruit cantata.

We're going to turn our building into a vine-greenhouse.

Me? I'm going to preach extra-hard for this vine branch, twice as long as usual. Amen!

Let's become a fruit-making machine!

³ See, for example, Psalm 80.1-6; Isaiah 5.1-7; Ezekiel 15. There are many others.

⁴ Frederick Dale Bruner, The Gospel of John, A Commentary (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 895.

⁵ Ibid, 879.

We do all this . . . and what's happening to the vine branch? Fruit?

Nope. Not a bud.

VI

No matter what we do, a branch unconnected from the vine withers, dies, and dries up. It's good for nothing but kindling. No fruit.

Jesus produces fruit through us, us together as his People. But only as we are part of him. We are profoundly dependent on him. We need to stick with him. Abide.

He's mixing a vine-picture with a home-picture. "Abide" is a "place" word. You "abide" in your "abode." You "house" in your "home." We live in Jesus.

Jesus came and "made his home among us."⁶ He comes to where we are. "*Teacher, where are you staying?*" we ask. "*Come and see*" he says. So we go to his place, and remain with him.⁷

It's real estate. You know, "*Location. Location. Location.*" Where will we abide? Will you make your home with Jesus?⁸

Stay with Jesus. Stick with Jesus. He is our vine-house. Our stick house.

Sticking with Jesus, fruit grows.

VII

How do we stay attached to the Vine, stay in Jesus, stick with him?

He tells us. "*If you stick with me, and my words stick with you. . . .*" Another time he said, "*If you make your home in my Word, you will be really my disciples; and you will come to know the truth, and the truth will set you free.*"⁹

Free. Is the pressure starting to lift?

We immerse ourselves in Jesus' teachings: what he has said, what he has done, who he is. In our Bible, the Gospel writers have passed them on for us.

These are not simply old words on a page or in our ears. The Holy Spirit brings them alive as we live them together. Other New Testament writers such as Paul figured

⁶ John 1.14.

⁷ See John 1.38-39.

⁸ Bruner, 881.

⁹ John 8.31-32. See Bruner's translation on p. 882.

out what Jesus meant for their first Christ-communities. The Spirit uses them to guide us now, as we live Jesus' word today.

Also, we stay with Jesus like we did last Sunday. We gather and share around his Table together, receiving him — his body, his blood — given for us. In his Meal, we remain united with Jesus, who was crucified and is risen.

We love him. We adore him. We rejoice in him. We rest in him. We stay with him. We have nowhere else to go. His are the words of eternal life.¹⁰ He is the Way of life.

A branch that is alive makes fruit.

VIII

Still feel pressure? Pressure to be fruitful?

Don't.

It's when we stop doing this, when we stop staying with Jesus, abiding in him. . . . It's when we become broken off from the Vine. . . . That's pressure. Then it's all up to us to perform. Then it's all up to us *make! that! fruit! grow!* But it won't.

When we're connected to the Vine, though, it doesn't seem that hard. Life flows. Growth happens. Buds form. Then fruit.

I haven't said what this fruit is, have I? What fruit does Jesus have in mind?

Next time, let's hear more good news.

¹⁰ John 6.68-69.