**“Everything depends on Christ” John 15:1-5**

**Intro**

There comes a point in each of our lives where we all come to the realization that we are not, in fact, good at everything. That moment probably came sooner for some of us than we would’ve liked it to. I can still remember discovering – for instance – that I was not good at inventing; that all the brilliant plans I drew up for robots or flame-throwers or whatever, were actually much harder to move from the design phase to the construction phase than I knew, and I had to abandon my hopes of being the next Davinci. And, of course, every man also learns, from the moment he gets married, that he is terrible at interior design. (“No, no, no – that chair can *not* go there!”)

Well, another one of those things that I discovered I’m not good at /is gardening. Which is actually kinda sad, b/c my dad really did try to impart some of his green-thumb//ness to me growing up, and it just never did take. Someone who’s clearly awesome at gardening actually, is Barb Ballantyne. I mean, if you ever get the chance to go over and check out her back yard, it’s like, “Bam! It’s like walking into a Better Homes and Gardens magazine; flowers and beauty everywhere; white doves flying overhead/angels singing.” It’s honestly pretty amazing to behold. So she clearly knows a lot about gardening and is good at it.

But I’ll tell you what: for as little as I *do* know about gardening, one thing I know for *certain* is that, if I try to make a garden like Barb’s in my own backyard, and – instead of planting seeds – I just sneak into her garden one night and rip off a bunch of flower heads and then glue or staple them to some straws or chopsticks and stick them into the ground /// those flowers are not going to survive if they are not connected to the root. Or if I break off the branch of an apple tree with apples growing on it, and just stick that branch into a flower pot on my kitchen counter, I’m not going to have my own apple tree in a couple of months, I’m gonna have a dead stick in a pot. B/c w/o being connected to the tree any longer, that branch cannot survive and it also cannot produce anything.

In our passage this morning – which is a part of what theologians call Jesus’ “farewell discourse” to His disciples – Jesus is going to leave those who were following Him then - as well as those who follow Him still today - with some spiritual gardening advice. Now, maybe if you knew you were about to die and leave those you loved behind, that’s not the first thing that might come to your mind. But, actually, what Jesus says here / is so essential to our lives – both individually and as a church – that, w/o this gardening advice, we will never be able to accomplish a *single thing* in our own spiritual growth, or, in living out our mission as a church.

And Jesus’ gardening advice is simply this: without a constant/consistent connection to Him, we are all as lifeless and unable to produce fruit as that apple tree branch planted in a flower-pot. In fact, *everything* we attempt to accomplish in the Christian life – says Jesus – depends entirely on our connection to Him. Everything depends on Christ.

We’re concluding our series this morning that we’ve entitled, “Core values: how we get where we’re going.” And the whole idea of this series has been to help us see that living out these core values/embodying them as a church is the only way we’re ever going to achieve our purpose as a church, which is to renew our city and world by demonstrating and declaring the transforming power of the gospel.

But let me be straight with you this morning: the reason this value sits at the center of the list, and the reason all these arrows are pointing from the other core values to this one, is that – if we don’t get this one right – *none of these* other values are even possible! And so it is *critical* for our own spiritual growth, as well as for the growth of the kingdom of God through us, that we understand very clearly what it is that Jesus is saying here in our passage this morning.

And in order to help us do that, I want to look at what Jesus says here in our passage in three ways: I want us to look at **Fruitfulness defined**, **Fruitless disconnection**, and finally **Fruitful connection. (x2)**

So if you’ve closed your bibles, please open then again to John 15 and we’ll get after this together.

Ok, so let’s start by looking at:

1. **Fruitfulness defined – vs. 1, 5**

Now, I think this is an important place to begin b/c Jesus is saying all this stuff about being connected to Him and producing/or not producing fruit. So it’s probably a good idea to have it clearly in our minds what Jesus even means by “fruit” or “being fruitful” before we talk about how it is that we do/or do not produce that fruit.

Shakespeare famously wrote that all of life is a stage and we are but players upon it. And I think in order to understand what Jesus means by “fruit”, the first thing we need to understand here is who the players are on this stage. And the reason is b/c, in order for fruit to be produced, we need to be very clear on roles, and who it is that is expected to be doing what.

I don’t know if you’ve ever been in a play before or been on a movie set, but when people start getting confused as to what their roles are, that’s when you start getting Christian Bale on the set of Terminator Salvation; imagining that’s he’s the director instead of the actor.

 So, look at verse one with me here. Jesus says **(READ vs. 1)**. So the first two players we see here are Jesus (Son) and God (the Father). Jesus says that He is the “**true Vine**” which means basically the main root/vine in a vineyard out of which the branches grow. So He is the source of life for the branches. And Jesus also says that God/Father is “**the Gardener**” or some of your translations will call Him “the Vinedresser.” And if you look at verse two, Jesus gives us a little more insight into what the role of the Gardener is – look with me there. He says here, basically, that the Gardener is the One who is inspecting the branches, and then doing whatever is necessary in order to produce the most fruit in His vineyard.

Ok, look down at verse 5 now. Here Jesus says **(READ vs. 5)** Now, if you look at the context, Jesus is talking here to His disciples. So the next players we have here are “**the branches**” or those parts of a vineyard that grow out of the vine and produce the fruit.

Ok, so – following Jesus’ metaphor of a vineyard – His disciples here (and, by implication, all those who follow Jesus after) are the branches that are supposed to be producing this fruit. Now, the fruit that a vineyard produces is, of course, grapes. So what is the fruit that those who are “in Christ” or attached to Christ supposed to be producing? Ultimately, what is the fruit that a Christian/a disciple or follower of Jesus is supposed to be producing?

Well, there’s a lot of different things that the bible refers to when it talks about what this fruit is supposed to be. Sometimes - like in Gal. 5:22 – that fruit refers to growth in Christian character; other times – like in Matt. 9 – it refers to the growth of God’s family in people becoming Christians; and yes, sometimes it just refers to fruit.

What I want to submit to you here is that what Jesus has in mind when He talks about us producing fruit is the first two: both personal growth in Christian character as well as the growth of God’s kingdom globally as people are brought into the family of God. If you look at vs. 7 Jesus says there **(READ vs. 7).** Because of this, theologian D. A. Carson says that this fruit Jesus is talking about is “everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus’ name, including obedience to Jesus’ commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus’ joy (v. 11–as earlier his peace, 14:27), love for one another (v. 12), and our witness to the world (vv. 16, 27).” He says this fruit is, “ **nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the Vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer’s life and the product of his witness.”**

Ok, so that’s what the fruit *is*. How do we go about producing it? Well, I’ll say more about that in a minute. But, big picture, Jesus says that we produce this fruit *only* by being connected to Him. Look again at verse 5. Jesus says that we need to be connected to Him – literally here “remain” in Him/some translations will say “abide” in Him; and the implication is that we are fed as branches by being connected to the Vine. So how are we fed/nourished by being connected to Jesus? How do we do that? B/c – I don’t know about you - but I’ve never seen Jesus before! And I’m sure the disciples had this is same question b/c – remember – this is Jesus’ “farewell discourse” and He is talking about going away and leaving this world. How are we supposed to be connected to Jesus and fed by Him if He’s no longer here walking the earth.

Well – go figure with me – the context of our passage gives us the answer. On both sides of our passage, Jesus speaks repeatedly about going away so that He can send the Holy Spirit. So, although He is not stated explicitly in our passage, this passage is actually saturated with Trinitarian doctrine. You see, as Christians, we believe that – although God is one – that the bible teaches that He also exists in three distinct, yet equal, Persons: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

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So what this passage is teaching us here - first of all - is that the **fruit** that is to be present in the life of everyone who claims to be connected to Jesus, is both our personal character growth, as well as the corporate results of our evangelistic/reconciling efforts as Christians. That’s what the fruit *is*. But the second thing we see here is that every Member of the Trinity is personally involved in bringing about that growth. God the Father is the Gardener – inspecting and cultivating the branches to bring about the most growth. God the Son is the Vine out of which we grow as branches, and He is then the thing that connects us to God the Father as well and the Conduit through Whom the life and energy of the Holy Spirit flows to us.

So, the core value says that, “Everything depends on Christ” and that’s b/c He is the One that reconciles us back to God; that connects us to Him in the first place. But what we see here is that all three Persons of the Trinity are necessary for bringing about that fruit.

Ok, so that’s what this “fruit” and fruitfulness *is* that Jesus is talking about. And I think that understanding that will help us now to be able to talk about how it is that we go about producing – or not producing - that fruit in our lives. And I want to begin, actually, by talking about how it is that we *won’t* produce any fruit, or what it is that keeps us fruitless. So let’s look now at:

1. **Fruitless disconnection – vs. 2, 4**

But, before we see what those look like - right out of the gate - whenever we’re talking about fruitfulness or spiritual growth at all in the Christian life, we need keep very clearly in our minds what the fruit is. That’s why I spent all that time trying to make that very clear for us. But we need to keep in mind as well that while – yes - this fruit is both personal as well as corporate growth in the kingdom of God, **the fruit, is *not* the thing that is connecting us to the Vine (x2). It is *always* and *only* the evidence that we are connected to it.**

And that needs to be very clear in our minds, particularly when we read things like what Jesus says in vs. 2. Look with me there. Jesus tells us that God the Father, the Gardener **(READ vs. 2a)** and, for a lot of us, we can read that and alarm bells can start going off; we can start to become terrified and think, “Oh man!!! Being a Christian *really does* depend on my effort. B/c Jesus just said there that the Gardener comes looking for fruit and if He doesn’t see any fruit there we get kicked off the team; we get sent to the minors!” Actually, it’s worse than that b/c if you look at what Jesus says in vs. 6, He says that those branches that are cut off get gathered up and burned!

And if we forget what Jesus means by fruitfulness, we can have one of two reactions:

* we can either slip into terrified, religious obedience thinking that what Jesus is saying here is that we just need to smarten up so we don’t get cut off from Him.
* Or we can go the other way and slide into despair or indifference to God; imagining Him to be a cruel and unfair Judge so why bother trying?

And both of those responses are wrong; and they’re wrong *because* they misunderstand/forget what the fruit actually is. B/c you see, Jesus is, actually, describing **two different types** of fruitless disconnection in this passage: one is simply unproductive and the other is fatal.

In vs. 2 Jesus is describing the fatal kind of disconnection. But, if we remember that spiritual fruit is not the cause of our connection to God, but the evidence of it, we see that the removal of these branches is not because they didn’t produce well enough //// it’s because they were never connected in the first place! Jesus says plainly throughout this passage that those who are truly connected to Him *will* bear fruit.

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So, the first thing to see here is that: if you see **no** spiritual fruit in your life *at all*; no growth in Christ-like character over time and no desire to see others come to faith in Christ, it would be well worth your time to sit down with a trusted Christian friend and really examine why that is. It doesn’t mean necessarily that you are not yet connected to Jesus, but it also *is* one real possibility.

The second type of fruitless disconnection Jesus describes here is in vs. 4 – look with me there. Jesus says here **(READ vs. 4)**. So what Jesus is describing here is simply a person who is connected to Him, and yet who imagines that – somehow – they can produce fruit apart from Him; and consequently they are unproductive in their fruit production. And the reason I want you to see this, is that this is also a very likely reason that you may not be seeing spiritual growth in your own life at times, or in seeing fruit/results in the things you are attempting for God. The reason Jesus lays out here /is that you may just be trying to accomplish that growth on your own strength instead of His. And every time you *do* that – no mater what you say you believe about Jesus and who you say you follow – functionally /you’re living like an atheist.

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 And one of the simplest tests that you can apply to your efforts at fruit production - to see where/from whom you’re drawing your strength/power from – is to examine your attitude when growth doesn’t happen, or, when it doesn’t happen like you expected it to. For example:

* When you pray for your family for years and they still don’t respond to your call to consider Jesus, do you feel like a failure? Like you should have tried harder? It’s possible you feel that way b/c you are seeking to produce fruit apart from the Vine, by your own strength!
* When you develop a set of core values for your church to help them achieve their purpose statement/// and nobody lives them out and you just keep cruising along at status quo, do you see that as your failure to lead well? To strategize well enough? Again, it’s possible we could feel that way here as a leadership if we were seeking to produce that kingdom growth apart from the power of the Holy Spirit alone flowing through our connection to the Vine.

So, again, don’t read what Jesus is saying here and immediately assume that you must not be saved b/c you’re not seeing fruit in your life right now. I’m not saying you should cross that option off the list, but – remember - there are *a lot* of things that can impede spiritual growth in the life of a Christian; and one that Jesus lays out here is simply seeking to accomplish that growth in your own strength. And Jesus’ clear teaching here at the end of **vs. 5** is that – apart from Him – we can do nothing! So examine *all* the options before you start questioning your connection to the Vine.

Finally, let’s look at how it is that we can and should go about producing this fruit in our lives. Let’s look now at:

1. **Fruitful connection – vs. 2-3**

A fun exercise and, honestly, a way to learn some really cool truths about God from His word, is by taking statements that the bible makes (positive or negative) and then flipping them around so you can see what the other side looks like. You discover some pretty cool things.

For us here this morning, one of the amazing truths we can learn from Jesus by doing this “flip” is in seeing that the opposite of Jesus’ statement in vs. 5: that apart from Him we can do nothing, is that when we *are* connected to Him and we when we *are* drawing our strength from Him, there is nothing we can’t accomplish; that what Jesus says very explicitly in the first part of vs. 5.

But the difficult part for us this morning is in understanding and accepting what a fruitful connection to Jesus actually looks like. We see it very clearly in the second half of verse 2. Look with me there. Jesus says **(READ vs. 2).** And that is often a hard thing for us to accept as we seek to grow spiritually b/c – most times – pruning hurts. It looks ugly at first at times too.

I remember growing up, my dad used to prune the willow tree in our front yard so much that it looked like the “Giving Tree” in Shel Siverstein’s classic children’s book after the boy had cut it back to a branchless stump. And yet, to look at it today even, you’d never know that it had been cut back so hard; and it continues to grow and thrive *because* it was pruned.

Same thing with us. Those of you who know some of my story know that I came to Vancouver trained and with big dreams of becoming a movie star. God pruned that dream from my life to make way for my next big dream which, was my pursuit of a career as a firefighter. God then pruned that dream away in order to make way for the Immerse program which would confirm and solidify His call on my life to pastoral ministry. And I’ll tell you what: every one of those cuts hurt; it hurt a lot and I couldn’t understand what God was doing. And it’s only now that I see a part of what He was doing in preparing me for this calling by training me up in, and then pruning away, those other pursuits.

Recently as a church, we have undergone some of the deepest pruning a church can go through as God has pruned away our lead pastor. And that cut has hurt and stung many of us; and it’s felt wrong and looked disordered and ugly to our eyes.

But look again at what Jesus says is the purpose of the Gardener’s pruning in vs. 2. He says the purpose is always so that the fruitful branch can now bear even more fruit! For over 80 years, this church has been a fruitful branch in God’s vineyard. And we must see that the recent pruning of our senior pastor is not about God’s desire to destroy this church, but to increase its fruitfulness /even more! When you think about it that way, that should, actually, make us excited about what God has in store for us in this next season of growth.

There’s an old poem by a guy named Arthur T. Pierson that I read years ago which I think really captures well this crazy balance between pruning from God’s perspective and ours all at once. He’s using the imagery of a gold refinery and talking about the way gold is refined in the fire to purify it and remove all the bits of dross that still remain. Listen to how He pictures God’s pruning work in the life of the Christian He desires to grow and purify:

*"He sat by a fire of seven-fold heat, As He watched by the precious ore, And closer He bent with a searching gaze As He heated it more and more. He knew He had ore that could stand the test, And He wanted the finest gold To mould as a crown for the King to wear, Set with gems with a price untold. So He laid our gold in the burning fire, Tho' we fain would have said Him 'Nay,' And He watched the dross that we had not seen, And it melted and passed away. And the gold grew brighter and yet more bright, But our eyes were so dim with tears, We saw but the fire--not the Master's hand, And questioned with anxious fears. Yet our gold shone out with a richer glow, As it mirrored a Form above, That bent o'er the fire, tho' unseen by us, With a look of ineffable love. Can we think that it pleases His loving heart To cause us a moment's pain? Ah, no! but He saw through the present cross, The bliss of eternal gain. So He waited there with a watchful eye, With a love that is strong and sure, And His gold did not suffer a bit more heat, Than was needed to make it pure."*

In the very same way, the Gardener’s pruning knife is always sure and true, and never cuts away anything that is not necessary in order to increase the fruitfulness of His vineyard. Whatever it is you’re facing today: will you trust the Gardener’s hand?

**Conclusion**

You know how in Hollywood when there’s a big movie premier, they put out those huge spotlights that shine up into the sky so that you know there’s something special going on there for miles around? In one sense, you could say these core values (name them) are - for our church - like four big spotlights that will shine up into the darkened sky of our community and our city; signaling to them that something special is happening here at Dunbar Heights as well. But you see, it’s not this church or the people here or the programs we offer than those lights are signaling. No each one is pointed solely at Jesus and what He did (and continues to do) in transforming us. And yet, we are also completely dependent on Christ to be the One who makes those lights shine; we can’t make these core-value lights shine by ourselves; by simply “doing them” well enough.

No, b/c you see - at the end of the day – we don’t actually need these core values to achieve our purpose as a church - we don’t! We don’t need me or Kajle or the staff or the right building or the right programs; we don’t need *any* of that. No, what we need is Jesus Christ working *in* and *through* each of those things. That’s what will make these lights shine brightly; that’s what makes us that “city on a hill”; that’s what will cause us to achieve our purpose as a church. *Everything* depends on Christ.