

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

I still have all of my yearbooks going back to my kindergarten class. It’s not often that I peruse them, but when I do it’s fun to notice the peculiar hairstyles, recall interactions with old classmates, and discover that my teachers were not nearly as old as I once thought they were. There is one image from my kindergarten yearbook that has always stuck with me, largely because I recall not understanding it. The photo is on that page that was emblazoned, “The First Day of School!” In the midst of various pictures with people smiling and waving at the camera, there is a photo of the school principal, who was consoling a young mother as she cried into his chest. I didn’t understand why she would be crying, so I asked my mom, who explained that the first day of kindergarten can be hard for parents. That explanation didn’t help much, but I assure you that I was thinking of that picture as I quietly held the hand of Pastor Ginger as we exited Ms. Smith’s kindergarten classroom after dropping off the twins on their first day of school.

I'm sure we left the twins with some instructions that day, like "Eat your sandwich before your dessert" and "Try to learn someone's name today." Whenever a child reaches a milestone, it seems that offering words of advice comes with the territory. I'm sure that I'll have other advice to give upon dropping off the twins at their first sleepover, as they go to their first school dance, before their first date, and upon move-in day at college.

Those parting words of advice are how we should hear Jesus' words in John 15 today. He's about to be arrested in the narrative, and this discourse is the final wisdom he shares with his disciples. This discourse in John is also meant to be the parting wisdom that Jesus shares with the whole church throughout time before he ascends to heaven. So as we read this gospel passage, note that in no way is Jesus making a threat here, as though God would cut people off. What he is saying is that as the church continues after his ascension, the circumstance may arise where worshiping communities allow other concerns to have more influence over the community than his teachings. For instance, a congregation that is more interested in being a country-club of sorts than living out Jesus' love for all people. Or a congregation that is more focused on having people toe the line for social issues X Y and Z instead of actually listening to Jesus. Because if a congregation listens to Jesus and they actually care for the orphan, the widow, and the outcast in their midst like he instructed, that would mean the congregation is getting to know people who ostensibly don't toe the line, and their stories just might change the congregation's outlook on its own purpose.

What Jesus is saying with this vine and branches imagery is that if we as a community remove ourselves from his core teaching concerning God's love, mercy, and inclusion, don't expect to bear the fruit of love, mercy, and inclusion. Other things may result, but it won't be the fruit that the gardener desires.

So imagine yourself at some stage of childhood or youth when an adult gave you some parting words of wisdom upon you reaching a milestone, even if it was "Eat your sandwich before your dessert." What was conveyed in their words? Was it merely

instruction? Or were the words conveying the person's care, love, concern, and hope? Jesus has those same emotions behind what he says in today's gospel passage. As he says the words, know that he would never cut us off if we mess up. He will always help us get back on track. Just like the milestones we reach as children and youth, Jesus wants us to send us off knowing fully that we are loved.

We have some more questions today that relate to our experiences as children and youth, and also what ministry for children and youth might look like today. This is a part of our build up for next week's Youth Sunday as well as some ground work for one of our congregational goals for the next five years. Please get into groups of 2 to 4 people sitting near you to discuss the questions on the cards that are being given out. We'll take about five minutes per card, starting with the Blue Card. I'll give a minute warning before it is time to move to the Pink Card and before it is time to wrap it up.

Blue Card

- 1) Share a joy that relates to children and youth. A challenge?
- 2) What can the church offer to children and youth today?

How might you be involved?

Pink Card

- 1) What's one positive experience you've had with children/youth ministry?
- 2) Can children/youth ministry today thrive in ways that differ from the past? How?
- 3) What role does the Holy Spirit play in this?

I hope that was a worthwhile experience. The ushers will collect the cards and the Council will review the responses to help us take our next steps toward our congregational goal. Let us pray. God, you are the gardener, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. Help us to always keep the source of our life together in the vine, Jesus Christ. May we always grow in his love, grace, and teachings, so that we may go out and bear the fruit that you desire. Amen.