

Rogation Sunday

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Preacher: Dean Baldwin

[0:00] In our gospel reading this morning, we returned to the upper room where Jesus has been giving! a lengthy discourse to his disciples. I'd like to share with you this morning what I think John chapter 15 verses 1 to 11 teach us about God the Father, God the Son, and about ourselves.

This Sunday is what we call in our church calendar Rogation Sunday. My hope is that as we examine this passage, it will move us to greater gratitude toward God, an increased appetite to participate in the life of the church, and a greater desire to intercede for our neighbors.

I am the true vine, Jesus says, and my Father is the vine dresser. Consider with me a couple of things that this passage teaches us about God the Father.

I want to focus on two things specifically. One, God as the vine dresser, and two, his attention as vine dresser to the vine.

Just last Sunday, my wife Kiri and I were driving home from a short trip from Pennsylvania, and we happened to be driving along 414 along Seneca Lake, which passes through the Finger Lakes wine country.

[1:27] Along the way, we passed vineyard after vineyard. It's easy to spot the vineyards in that countryside, because you can see that they're full of vines that have been well cared for.

In contrast, we live out in Cato, New York, and we've got lots of wild grape vines out there. Those vines you can see along the roadside. If you go hiking through the forest, they're everywhere.

They spread through the trees, but they tend to have very small berries that are full of seeds and quite sour. In a vineyard, by contrast, grapes have been planted with purpose and care.

The vines are not allowed to run wild like they are out in Cato. And because of that, the fruits tend to be large and sweet, useful and plentiful.

The vines in a vineyard are cultivated. They have not arrived in the vineyard by accident or chance. They have been planted with purpose and care so that they may be healthy and fruitful.

[2:33] To me, this passage calls to mind God's creation of the world in Genesis chapter 1. Adam and Eve are planted in a garden called Eden by a gardener.

Before he creates mankind, God created a perfect habitat for them with all that they needed. A safe haven full of trees and plants for their sustenance, animals for their pleasure and work, sun, moon, and stars to mark the seasons, and so on.

Like a careful vine dresser, the Creator has taken care to make sure that man and woman have everything that they need in order to be fruitful and multiply.

His desire is that they bear fruit, and he gave them everything that they needed in order to do just that. I am the true vine, Jesus tells us, and my Father is the vine dresser.

The portrait that Jesus gives us of the Father is that he is actively participating in his creation for their benefit. The God of Christians is not a God who created the world and then stood back to let it go its own course.

[3:52] Matthew Parker was one of the first archbishops of Canterbury during the English Reformation. He helped to write many of the homilies or sermons that are found in a book called the Anglican Book of Homilies, especially the second book.

In particular, Matthew Parker wrote a homily for Rogation Sunday, and in it he gives us this analogy, which relates to our passage this morning.

The God we encounter in the scriptures is not like a shipbuilder who built a ship and then gave it to the mariners and then had nothing more to do with it. Instead, God is actively at work in the creation that he loves, as a vine dresser is active in the vineyard that he loves, giving good gifts so that his people can thrive and be fruitful.

Today is Rogation Sunday. One of the major themes of Rogation Days is recognizing that all good things come from God. The Apostle James puts it this way, Every good and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of Lights.

Rogation Sunday and the three days that follow have traditionally been associated with the spring planting season. In a post-agricultural society, it is easy to forget that each one of us depends upon God for the food that we eat each day.

[5 : 24] A Christian understanding of agriculture recognizes that the fruits of the harvest and our daily bread do not come to us exclusively because of our labor or a smoothly running supply chain, but because of God graciously sending rain and fair weather so that crops can grow.

The Rogation Days call us to express our gratitude to God for the natural gifts he has given us in creation, and to ask that he will continue to be merciful to us and to our neighbors by sending rain and fair weather.

Returning to Jesus' metaphor of God the Father as a vine dresser, I think we need to be careful not to stretch the analogy too far. For example, why does a human vine dresser take care of his vine? Perhaps it's for his livelihood, or perhaps it's a hobby. But in either case, the vine and his care for it is fulfilling some need that the vine dresser has, whether it's income or pleasure.

By contrast, God has no need of us. It is his character, his very essence, to lovingly care for other people or for others.

[6 : 44] But make no mistake, he does not need to be needed, as if he was lacking anything in himself. It is the vine and the branches that are blessed because of God the caretaker.

St. Augustine of Hippo put it this way, The blessedness of God was neither less without us nor became greater because of us. Finally, notice with me that the vine dresser does not ignore or overlook any of the branches.

He gives attention to each one. Do you ever feel ignored? Like nobody sees you? Like nobody cares for you? Like nobody listens to you?

My wife is a middle child. Are there any middle children in here? Not a single one of you, even you middle children, is overlooked by our Heavenly Father.

God has noticed you, and he sees you. Now, there should be a practical takeaway for us this morning that should be reassurance for those of us who are in Christ and cause anxiety and worry for those who are not.

[7 : 55] Are you in Christ? God sees you. I invite you to turn now your attention to two things that we learn from this passage about God the Son.

First, that he is the true vine, and second, that he is the mediator of all of God's gifts to humankind. I am the true vine, Jesus tells us.

Christ Jesus, the Son of God, declares himself to be the only source of life, especially spiritual life. In the Gospel of John, throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus declared himself the way, the truth, and the life.

Not merely a way, or a truth, or a life, but the only way. In case that wasn't clear to his disciples, in this passage, Jesus declares himself the true vine.

Christ Jesus designates himself the true vine in order to distinguish himself from any other vine. To understand this fully, we have to understand that throughout the Old Testament, the people of Israel are often identified as a vine belonging to God.

[9 : 07] The people of Israel, according to the promises that God made to Abraham and to his descendants, were called by God to be his instruments for the redemption of the world and the blessing of all nations.

In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses contrasts Israel with the false vines that come from Sodom and Gomorrah. In Psalm 80, recollecting the exodus from Egypt, the psalmist describes Israel as a vine that God brought out of Egypt.

When Israel disobeyed God and fell into idolatry, they ceased to be that life-giving vine that God had intended them to be. We read this further in Jeremiah 2, verse 21.

I planted you a vine, holy of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?

In the Old Testament, Israel was to be an instrument of God's salvation. But through their rebellion, they gave up their place in God's plan to fix his broken creation.

[10:20] Returning to our passage this morning, when Jesus says that he is the true vine, he is saying that he is the true Israel. By abiding in Christ, then, we are joining the true Israel.

Although Israel rebelled against him, God promised that from one of Abraham's descendants, he would restore Israel and accomplish his promise to bless all nations through Abraham's seed. It was foretold that this would happen through the line of one of Jacob's, one of Israel's sons, namely through the line of Judah. As we read this morning in Psalm 148, in verse 14 it says, God shall exalt the horn of his people.

This was fulfilled in Jesus, the true vine, the true hope of Israel. The second thing I noticed this morning about God the Son in this passage is that he is the mediator between mankind and the Father.

All good gifts come from God the Father, James tells us, but we receive them through Jesus Christ divine. This is true of all kinds of gifts, whether they are natural gifts or they're spiritual gifts.

[11:40] Again, Archbishop Parker puts it this way. Jesus Christ, God's Son, our Savior, is the means by which we receive God's liberal goodness.

God took on flesh in the person of Christ Jesus. Jesus abides in the love of the Father. We abide in the love of the Father as we abide in Christ's Son.

What is the most extraordinary gift that God has given to us? In Christ? Through Christ, we can participate in the life and love of the triune God.

Did you catch that? So far, we've looked at what this passage tells us about God the Father. We've looked briefly at what it teaches us about God the Son.

Now let's turn to see what this passage tells us about ourselves. This passage describes two kinds of branches, and we are either one or we're the other.

[12:48] Jesus is not, in other words, talking about literal branches on a literal vine. He's not giving us a horticultural lecture about how to grow good grapes.

He's talking about humans and their relationship with the Creator through him. The first kind of branch that Jesus identifies is the branch that does not bear fruit.

This branch is described in verses 2, 4, and 6. The second kind he describes is one that does bear fruit. Now it's interesting to me that in verse 2 that Jesus describes the fruitless branches as still in him.

Did you notice that? Look at verse 2. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away. Somehow these branches are in him, and yet they're not abiding in him.

So how do we explain this? I think Jesus is describing the reality that in him we live and move and have our being, as St. Paul says in Acts chapter 17.

[13:59] And Paul goes on to say in Colossians, all things were created through him and for him, and in him all things hold together. So whether a branch is fruitful or whether it's fruitless, it is still in him in the sense that all things have been created by him and have him as their source and their sustenance.

In verse 4, Jesus says that by its very nature, a branch can do nothing apart from the vine working in it.

Apart from me, Jesus says, you can do nothing. The difference between the branches, then, is that one type is merely in him and the other abides in him.

This is confirmed in verse 6 when Jesus says, if anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. I want to suggest one important similarity between the two different kinds of branches and then one critical difference.

The most important similarity between a fruitful branch and a fruitless branch is that apart from the life-giving vine, that branch can do nothing.

[15:17] This, I believe, is the main thrust of the passage this morning. The primary activity in this passage is not what the branches do or what they don't do, but on what the vinedresser and the vine do to the branches or don't do to the branches.

So the similarity is that apart from the vine, they can do nothing. The critical difference between the branches is that some branches abide in Christ and some don't.

As they abide in Christ, the fruitful branches allow the life of the vine to flow through them and into them. As I said, the primary action in this passage comes from God.

So let's now turn to see what the vinedresser, God the Father, and the true vine, God the Son, do to and in the branches. The Father is proactive toward each and every branch.

Remember, God is not like a shipbuilder that builds a ship, hands it over to the mariners, and sends it on its merry way. He's actively involved in his creation.

[16 : 30] We see this in the action of God toward the fruitless branches. When God sees a branch that is not bearing fruit, he cuts it off from the vine, the source of life.

Verse 6 tells us of the fate of these types of branches. They're thrown away, they wither, and they're burned. That which is cut off cannot live apart from the root.

Why are there branches that don't bear fruit? I think this is the same as asking, why are there individuals who reject God's love?

In some ways, this is a mystery to us. But we see from the scriptures that there always has been, always will be, people who willfully reject God's goodness toward them.

I think this suggests that to not be abiding in Christ is to know of God's goodness and love toward us, and yet to proactively and purposefully reject it.

[17 : 33] The scriptures are ripe with examples of this. The people of Israel are God's chosen people, tend to be the chief example. The fall of Israel is a warning to us who are gathered here today, as the Church of Christ.

We know of God's goodness toward us and toward all mankind, and we testify to it every Sunday in our worship. In his Rogation Homily, Archbishop Parker reminds us that it profits nothing to hear the goodness of God declared to us if our hearts are not inflamed to honor and to thank Him.

Likewise, it profited not the Israelites, who were God's elect people, to hear much from God, seeing that He was not received in their hearts by faith, nor thanked for His benefits bestowed upon them.

He goes on, their unthankfulness, their unthankfulness was the cause of their destruction. We must ask ourselves today and every day, are we grateful for God's gifts to us?

Now let's look at God's action toward the branches that do abide in the vine. First, we see that every branch that does bear fruit, He prunes so that it becomes more fruitful.

[19 : 06] The branches cannot bear fruit of themselves, but every branch in the vine bears some fruit. It is not because they are bearing fruit that God attends to the branches as if they had done something to earn His notice.

God attends to them because that's what He does, and He gives these branches special attention because they are in the vine, that is, because they are in Christ. God, therefore, brings the initial fruit and He then makes these branches more full of fruit by pruning them.

I think I could have spent a whole morning preaching on what the fruit here in this passage might be referring to, but I want to suggest two ideas before we close.

Firstly, I think that the fruit here in this passage implies the fullness of God's goodness toward us, which we Christians believe will culminate in the resurrection of the dead and life everlasting with God the Creator.

Jesus says in John 15, verse 11, These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

[20 : 27] God, through Jesus Christ, promises that the joy of God Almighty will fill us. Christ Jesus as the mediator and means by which we receive God the Father's lavish gifts is reflected in the collect for Rogation Sunday.

This was the prayer that Father Ife prayed. I think it's on page 6 of your bulletin. He prayed it earlier in the service and it says God has prepared for those who love him such good things as surpass our understanding.

And secondly, it says that God's promises exceed all that we can desire. This is some of the fruit that comes to us.

I believe the fruit also implies the fruits of the Spirit. Jesus says in John 15 verse 3 that we are clean because of his word. When we abide in Christ and receive God's goodness toward us, the Holy Spirit lives in us and helps us to live a godly life.

When we abide in his love, we keep his commandments. In 1 Peter chapter 2 verse 5, St. Peter tells us that the people of God are like living stones that are being built up as a spiritual house, a holy priesthood to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Christ Jesus.

[22 : 02] Some of the fruits that come from abiding in Christ manifest in holy living and holy worship. This is what St. Peter was describing, I believe, in 1 Peter 3 verses 8 to 18 which we read this morning.

hear part of it again. Have unity of mind, sympathy, brotherly love, a tender heart, a humble mind.

