

LESSONS FROM THE VINEYARD



ON A RAINY DAY

Alternate Worship Service at Field Stone Winery, Alexander Valley, Healdsburg, California

Scripture:

John 15:1-11

I am the True Vine

¹"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.

³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.

⁴Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

⁶If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.

¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love.

¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

John 15:12-17

Love One Another

¹²"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

¹³Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.

¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you.

¹⁵No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you.

¹⁶You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you.

¹⁷These things I command you, so that you will love one another.



WHY DID WE COME TO THE VINEYARDS?

We are gathered in the vineyards today. People have told me this is their favorite service. As I wrote my notes, it looked like that we might be inside due to weather, or your pants will be soaking on soggy ground. Inside, we will be standing among large barrels in which the wine is stored while it ages and waits to be bottled.

This is not one of those "you can see forever days" because there is a series of tropic storms off the coast about 30 miles to the west. Leave your camera in a waterproof bag because this weather is terrible.

Or is it?

We have come here for a great day in the vineyards; while we are here, we might be willing to see if there is anything we can learn from agriculture.

So how is a weekend of rain viewed from the point of view of the grapes?

Jesus walked valleys of vineyards and gardens of olives, and they were the setting for some of his most important messages. He drew symbolism from the lilies of the field, the birds of the air, and the cycles of nature. These symbols connected him with the people who were mostly agrarian.

Is there a lesson here today?

Yes, the grapevines are deliriously happy. They are ecstatic. They have been struggling for a drink of water in the midst of the worst drought in modern California history.

If you are a grape, this is not a dreary day. This is the mid-spring miracle of moisture that the grapes have been praying for.

If you are a grower, you may be even happier. This rain will save the growers hundreds of thousands of dollars.

My neighbor works with NovaVine Grapevine Nursery providing grape stock for the Sonoma County growers and advising them on cultivation. He says that this could not have come at a better time for the new plants.

Water is so low from the rivers that they have turned off the flow meters. This water will help replenish the holding ponds.

This water will make the soil muddy rather than hard and impenetrable. In a word, Mike says, "This rain is huge for Sonoma County!"

I asked him if it would save the crop. He said, "Not sure. There are still lots of obstacles ahead, unknowns of weather, insects, and disease. It's too soon to tell. But at this point in the season, this rain is huge; it's huge, baby."

(It's still nice to be somebody's baby.)

SEVERE DROUGHT

From the point of view of the grapes we came to observe, you and I have gotten what we hoped for. We have pennies from heaven that no one has to pay for. Two months ago the newspapers said the

snow pack was low, and the rains have not come. "California faces the worst drought in modern history."

Today the rains have come.

Let the people say, "Amen."

OTHER DANGERS TO THE CROPS: LOCUSTS

In the Hebrew Scriptures one of the greatest dangers to the crops was the locusts. There is a parallel between the seasons of discontent in humans, and the swarms of locusts that attacked the crops of the Hebrews. The Lord declared that following their great losses to the locust, there would be great harvests.

When the locusts come, they eat every living plant down to the roots. The farmers and their hired hands drive the cattle and horses out of the fields in an attempt to crush the locusts before they can lay their eggs. However, despite their efforts, the farms will yield no harvest that year.

In large or small ways, we all have experienced our own "swarm of locusts," many of us more recently than not. We have contributed to our 401(k)s for years, only to see them decline to nothing. We have given a great chunk of our lives to companies, only to receive pink slips in the end. We have faithfully paid our mortgages, only to find the value of our homes slide to basement levels. At times it seems our best intentions-including our spiritual work-melt before the heat of our ambitions and selfishness.

But in the year following the devastation by locusts there come times for bountiful crops. The crushed locusts become a rich fertilizer for the soil.

Using a season of great loss eventually yields great results. May we use wisely our losses in this season of the locusts and allow the Spirit to build a treasure for us that neither thief nor moth can touch.

Pruning our retirement accounts, losing the funds we had depended upon our homes to earn, reexamining our priorities as individuals, and demands that we return again to our faith to sustain us in times that seem to be standing on their heads.

**It is hard to see what is around the corner
when we are looking down at our feet.**

GREAT RESULTS

We have gotten the lesson we sought in the vineyard. Rain is the primary lesson of agrarian faith.

- **Faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. (Hebrews 11:1-2 Revised Standard Version) And without faith it is impossible to please God. For whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him. (Hebrews 11:6 RSV)**

We have prayed for rain for the last three months, and for the last five years. I hope some of you had the good sense to bring an umbrella today, and waterproof shoes.

- Faith and doubt both are needed - not as antagonists, but working side by side to take us around the unknown curve. ~ Lillian Smith
- Faith is taking the first step even when you don't see the whole staircase. ~ Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Faith makes the discords of the present the harmonies of the future. ~ Robert Collyer
- Feed your faith and your fears will starve to death. ~ Author Unknown

REINHOLD NIEBUHR:

Nothing worth doing is completed in our lifetime.
Therefore, we are saved by hope.
Nothing true or beautiful or good makes complete sense in any immediate context of history.
Therefore, we are saved by faith.
Nothing we do, however virtuous, can be accomplished alone.
Therefore, we are saved by love.
No virtuous act is quite a virtuous from the standpoint of our friend or foe as from our own.
Therefore, we are saved by the final form of love which is forgiveness.

NEW IDEAS WILL COME

The challenging times we are in are good for us. New ideas will come for each of us. Remember that we were lucky enough to be in the vineyards when our prayers were answered, when our fellowship was renewed, and when we were grateful to God that our skin is waterproof.

For the second time, let everyone say, "Amen."

Pray with me: Help us, O Lord, as individuals and as a church to search for you our Lord and our God in all that we do. Lord, sometimes it is in our greatest loss that you help us to find an unknown strength. It is in our greatest challenges that we can often achieve our greatest accomplishments. Help us to take note of the locusts around us and to take every opportunity to use them for the greater good, for the building of your Kingdom, for the building of our church, your church. We pray these things in Jesus' name. Amen



**Dr. John H. Cushman
Presbyterian Church of the Roses
2500 Patio Court
Santa Rosa, CA 95405
May 3, 2009**