

OPENING PRAYER

We come before you Lord needing the love you alone can provide and knowing that within you and by you and through you all that we need can be found.

Pour out upon us today your grace and mercy - make your Spirit move strongly within us - that in our hearts there may be an abundance of your holy love and in our minds the fullness of your sacred word. Abide in us and with us and help us to abide in you as we proclaim your glory and seek your strength - both now, and indeed forevermore. Amen.

OFFERTORY PRAYER

Lord, we give thanks for many reasons most important among them being our gratitude and our desire to obey and serve you as best we can. We pray, O God, that you would bless all that we offer to you at this time and that you would make it fruitful and result in ever greater praise being given unto your name. **Amen.**

JOHN 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. {2} He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. {3} You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. {4} Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. {5} "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. {6} If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. {7} If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. {8} This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

LET US NOT BE DETACHED

Jesus said:

I am the true vine, and my father is the gardener; he cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.... I am the vine, you are the branches. If a person remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

I do not think that there is any better image of the Christian life and of what it is supposed to be like, than this.

I want to dwell on this image today and on the promise that is made with it, that promise that says: "If a person remains in me and I in him, he will

bear much fruit".

I find this image of what it means to be a Christian tremendously reassuring.

There is so much grace in these words for people who are tired out from all their work or discouraged by the fact that they do not feel they are good enough for God or that they have not done enough for Him.

The image of Jesus as the vine and ourselves as branches reminds that salvation and wholeness, and all good things that we experience and produce, come not because of what we do, but because of what we are and where we are.

Even obedience to the Law of God, that obedience which, as we are told in the Book of Deuteronomy leads to abundant prosperity and blessings upon the land.

Even this necessary obedience is transformed by the image of the vine and the branches from being something that we strive to do by our own power and might and effort to something that God produces in us when we are attached to him as a branch is attached to a vine.

I am not a gardener, but I have a good friend who is, and he has one of the most beautiful gardens around.

He told me one time about a cucumber plot he had planted. He had been very careful to select the best seeds and plant each one at its proper depth. He fertilized and watered the plants, he worked the soil faithfully each week to prevent weeds from encroaching and he sprayed to prevent bugs and blights from afflicting the young plants.

The season was a good one; just the right amount of rain and sunshine, and on the vines appeared broad green leaves and in due course the blooms. It looked magnificent.

One day he noticed that here and there certain leaves were dying, certain blooms fading. Most of the leaves remained a healthy glossy green but scattered among them were those turning brown. Why, he wondered, would some die in the midst of all the living? So, he investigated. Stepping carefully among the tangled mass of vines he traced the ones on which the leaves and blooms were dying, until he found that they were all connected to a single stem. There, just above the ground, cut-worms had severed the stalk. The entire vine above that point was dying because it was no longer attached to the roots and the stem that had produced it.

It is a common story, but it is an instructive one.

It reminds us that we die spiritually, that we are incapable of producing fruit, when we are not attached to the vine, or when we are not connected to the roots which nourish us.

It also reminds us that when we are attached, that the fruit that we produce and the prosperity of the land itself, comes to us naturally, as a gift of God.

The gardener does the work and the vine he plants carries the sap and all its nutrition to us, and we, because we are in the right place, prosper and produce for the world the fruit that it needs. All of us want to do good things, we want to produce good fruit, but many of us, in trying to do good things, end up feeling burned out, exhausted and even despairing. This particularly happens to many people in the so-called caring professions; to doctors, social workers, nurses, and the like.

They do much good, but many get frustrated, angry, and tired. Their ability to help others decreases, and some end up giving up entirely on their professions.

There are others who do as much if not more. Others who are full of hope and of life, full of care and love for their neighbours and their world, who never fall prey to this plague, but rather go and on, touching and healing those around them by what they do.

I believe it is because they are connected to the source of hope, to the source of life, to the source of care and love, for their neighbours and their world.

The cup of water to those who thirst, the word of assurance to those who are in doubt; the comforting hug to those who are in pain; the gift to those who do not know if they are loved, and the deed of kindness to the one who is in need, are things that God wants us to do.

They are part of what Jesus calls the fruit of being in him. They are also the evidence and the badge of the Christian life, proof that we are who we say we are.

But the badge is not the thing that saves us. It is not the thing that brings us into a relationship with God, but rather it is only the thing that shows that we are saved and are already in a close relationship with God.

Let me remind you of what fruit is.

Fruit is the excess, the overflow of the life that a plant has taken into itself. The more life that a plant takes into itself the more life it produces.

When there is an abundance of sunshine to fuel photosynthesis, and when there is adequate water and nutrients in the soil to be passed up the trunk and into the branches, those branches thrive, and grow, and produce, and grow again.

The plant and its branches don't have to force themselves to grow, they do not have to make a resolution to bring forth sweeter and more succulent fruit, nor do they need to remind themselves to be more abundant in their production.

They simply need to be in the right place, the place that the gardener has prepared for it; the place where the conditions for growth and fruit bearing are found.

For us the right place to be is in the vine that has been planted by God and which is tended by God. The vine which we call Christ.

Each one of us today, as people who profess that Jesus is our Lord and believe in our hearts that He rose from the dead, are part of the vine of Christ.

We are able to produce tremendous quantities of fruit. Conditions are perfect for our growth because God himself tends us and ensures that those conditions are perfect.

All we need do to be fruitful is remain a part of the vine and perform the simple tasks that every branch performs as a means of maintaining a fruitful life in the vine.

Basically, there are only two task that we need to do, just as there are only two tasks that a branch in a vine does.

First, the branch, through its twigs and leaves, receives energy from the sun to fuel its growth. The leaves, by the miraculous process of photosynthesis, convert light into plant energy which helps to drive the system that produces fruit as its end result.

Secondly, the branch, through its connections to the stem of the plant receives moisture and nutrients from the soil, it receives the life-giving sap that makes its grow.

I realize that this description lacks a little in botanical terms, but in theological terms it reminds us of all that we need to do to be pleasing to God.

FIRST - The branch receives energy from the sun through its leaves.

So, we too receive energy when we unfold ourselves before God and accept from Him the light He offers to us in His Word, both the written word of scripture, and the living word of Jesus Christ.

I am sure you have all noticed how plants track the sun, how they focus on it, how they lean towards its light and turn towards wherever it is.

Owners of houseplants know this very well.

If they do not want a plant with a permanent lean to it, they must periodically turn the pot it is in so that it begins to lean in the opposite direction, and hopefully, if they catch it at the right time in

its leaning, it remains in a nice upright position.

They also know that if you take a plant and you lock it in a cupboard for even one day its leaves pale and droop and it begins to die.

In the same way we need to be exposed to the word of God.

We need daily contact with the light it sheds.

We need to hold his teachings in our minds and in our hearts so that we might draw from them the strength and energy we need.

When we do that, when we lean out to receive God's word, when we absorb His words like the plant absorbs the sunlight, then a miracle occurs in us.

God's word gives us part of what we need for life and the production of life.

Psalms One says it very well:

Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers, but whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and on whose law he meditates day and night.

He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither.

SECOND - The branch is connected to the stem or trunk, receiving from it the nutrients and moisture that it needs.

The branch is, for want of a better word, in communion with the vine and through that communion it is able to produce fruit.

The same truth applies to us.

All the light in the world, all the reading of God's word and meditation upon the gospel of Jesus, will not avail us much, unless we are connected to Him.

The connection is established by God and it is maintained by us through the way of faith and prayer; the way of trust and worship; the way of willingness to receive from God by making ourselves available to God as part of Christ's living body, the church.

These things both keep us in the vine and feed us that we might produce fruit.

When Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and you are branches", He also said ***"no branch can bear fruit by itself, it must remain in the vine"***.

We remain part of the vine

- when we are willing to obey the commandments that Jesus has given us,

- when we are willing to love each other and to love God,
- when we are willing to forgive each other and trust God to forgive us,
- when we are willing to be seen with the rest of the branches in the vine.

We remain a part of the vine and produce fruit

- when we commune with God
- when we are willing to pray to Him and listen for His answers,
- when we are willing to worship Him even if it takes us away from our Sunday dinner or our favourite sporting event for a few minutes,
- when we are willing to trust in Him even when we think that He is not doing enough.

Communion with God and God's church is the connection to the vine which feeds us; and communion with God involves our heart and our will:

- the heart that loves all things that God has made, and the will that gives Him praise for them;
- the heart that aches for all the sin of the world, and the will that tells the good news of Christ's love,
- the heart that believes that God alone makes the difference and the will that asks God to make a difference to oneself.

Being connected to the vine is a matter of the heart and the will; the heart that trusts God, and the will that leads one to act as if every single one of God's promises can be counted on.

When we have the heart and the will, God does the rest through us.

I want to end where I began, by saying that there is a lot of grace in the words of Jesus.

I am the vine, you are the branches. If a man remain in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.

Just go outside after the service and look around at the trees and plants that are beginning their cycle of growth once again.

God is a good gardener. He is a great gardener and what He plants and tends is tremendously fertile, tremendously productive.

God has planted the Vine called Christ in our midst, and when we are willing, He grafts us into that vine, and provides to us all things needful for growth.

All we have to do to remain a part of the vine and produce fruit pleasing to Him. Let us open ourselves up to the light of His word and commune with Him through His Risen Son.

God gives to those who seek to be with him, and He gives only what is good and which helps us to be what He created us to be: a blessing to the world. Praise be to God, our Gardener and our King. Amen.

Let us pray.

Loving God, we praise You for being such an awesome gardener, for casting Your seed far and wide without regard to where it might land or how it might be received. We praise You for Your indiscriminate love, Your willingness to forgive, Your desire to see all people made whole. Oh God, we pray that in us, instead of the thornbush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briers the fruit will grow.

Lord Jesus, we praise You for being such powerful seed, for growing and producing such abundant fruit among those who not only receive You with joy but who in faithfulness continue

to listen to You once You have taken root in them. We thank You for offering to take our burdens, those burdens that might choke out the good news of the Kingdom of God and for offering to us your yoke and Your burden. The yoke of being a sower of Your love and the burden of caring for those you care for. Help us Lord to have the ears to hear and the will to do what You want us to hear and do.

We know that we cannot exist without You and that You are the vine, and we are the branches. Give us the faith of the Apostles. Make us love what You command and desire what You promise, that amid all the changes of this world, our hearts may be fixed where true joy is found.

Be with us now as we enter yet another week, another week of dealing with this Covid. Help us not to be discouraged and sad because of all things that are happening around us. We put our trust and our love in You, o God because You are our Rock and our Redeemer.

AMEN

BENEDICTION

Go in peace, love and care for one another in the name of Christ;

- and may God's Most Holy Word be a lamp unto your feet;

- may God most Holy Love guide you in Acts of Compassion,

- and may God's Own Strength uphold you and make you fruitful

in the glorious work of his kingdom - both now - and evermore. Amen