

I Am The Vine

[John 15:1-17](#)

Today's gospel talks a lot about bearing fruit. Many of you are very familiar with the cycle of prepping soil, planting seeds, tending plants through the growing season, and finally harvesting the result of your labor – the fruits of your garden.

There is a sense of timing and a sense of preparation – we cannot simply go from the hard, frozen ground to a bountiful harvest without proceeding through these important steps. I confess that I was not raised on a farm, but I'm guessing most of you already knew that! I did expand my garden this year and planted corn for the first time after having an extensive talk with Bobby Whetzel about the subject. I wasn't sure exactly when to start planting corn, so I used the area farmers as a guide. When they prepped their field, I had Mark prep ours! When I started seeing their neat rows I knew they had probably started planting,

so I did too. I admit my corn is a lot shorter than theirs as I was probably about two weeks behind them – schoolwork kept getting in the way! So now we are in the tending stage – weeding, fertilizing, watering when nature doesn't take a hand, prepping compost, etc. There is work involved in order to bear fruit.

Mount Tabor is an Acts II church – I mentioned this a couple weeks ago. But what exactly does this mean? Our Bishop has set about certain criteria to look at whether or not Mount Tabor is bearing good fruit. First, we needed to increase our average worship attendance by 2% over last year. Why is this important? The scripture tells us that branches such as we are cannot bear fruit if they are not connected with the vine. We need to be connected with our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is simply not possible to bear good fruit and not maintain the

connection to the vine. I have often gotten angry when I'm working in the garden and accidentally rip off a fruit-bearing branch of a bean plant or a cucumber vine. Once the connection is severed, it is no longer possible for that branch to bear fruit. So as a community of God, we need to stay connected with our source of strength and encouragement. Hence, we are evaluated on our worship attendance. I am pleased to say we have increased our worship attendance on average from 15 to 25 – that is a 67% increase in one year! There are not a lot of churches that can say that!

Our second Acts II church criterion was to add members – 1 member for every 25 people in average worship attendance. We only needed to add one – we added two in the last year. So why would this be a criterion to show we are bearing fruit? I believe it shows we have people who are willing to make a

commitment to God for the long term. Saying you want to be more than someone who regularly attends church – that you want to become a member of a specific faith community often involves taking a more active role in the function of the church. I believe it basically means we want to be counted among those who wish to be a part of this community of believers. We want to make a difference as we stand with others who have made a similar commitment. Bobby Allnutt has been helping to sort out our membership role and I believe the current count is 87. So from a numbers standpoint, we have increased our membership by 2% in the last year. We have met the second criterion for becoming an Acts II church.

Our third criterion involves our stewardship as a local church. We are part of a much bigger organization as United Methodists. As such, there are programs and support given at

the conference level that our church helps to support. Programs such as Dollars for Scholars, which I am pleased to announce that I have been accepted for next year! Other programs include support for organizations in Zimbabwe and other countries, support for local missionaries through campus ministries, and support for struggling churches within the conference. Even with the struggles and financial battles faced by this congregation, Mount Tabor has consistently paid 100% of its apportionments as a sign of our exceptional stewardship. We take that responsibility very seriously. By meeting all of these criteria, Mount Tabor is an Acts II church! This is cause to rejoice. In a time when the denomination is seeing declines all around, we are forging ahead as a leader in our area.

None of these criteria could have been met without Mount Tabor as a congregation remaining connected to the vine – to

our source of strength and courage. We do not maintain the root of the vine – that job belongs to Jesus. Jesus placed himself as the advocate between us and God. The scripture also refers to Jesus as the way, the truth, and the life – as such no one comes to God but through Jesus.

Some may question the need to bear fruit. Paul talks in his letters of how faith, not works, is what will bring us eternal life. In Paul's letter to the Galatians, he was struggling with their understanding that they had to follow the works of Jewish law in order to find salvation. Galatians 2:16 says, "...know that a man is not justified by observing the law, but by faith in Jesus Christ." Here Paul is noting that we cannot earn God's grace – it is a gift freely given to anyone who wishes to receive it. So it seems as if we shouldn't need to worry about bearing fruit – all we need is our faith.

It is true that our good works alone are not enough. Yet Jesus sums up the law in 2 parts – love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love your neighbor. We are charged to bear fruit by serving our neighbors. We do not do good deeds in the hope of winning salvation, but as a result of our forgiveness for our sins. None of us is expected to live in a vacuum. Our community provides the strength and reassurance we need to face difficult times and also to share God’s love with others. We have come to God and laid down our burdens – there is an incredible freedom in knowing that God is in control.

The book of James has some interesting statements about faith and works as well. It appears initially that James did not agree with Paul’s assessment, because James basically says that faith without works is dead. It doesn’t get more basic than that. The difference appears to be the use of the term ‘works.’ For

Paul, works are deeds done to fulfill Jewish law, such as maintaining food laws and submitting to circumcision. For James, works are those actions we do because of our faith – we help the poor, we comfort the grieving, we care for the sick, we feed the hungry. We share God’s love as the messengers of the good news. We are all sinners; Christ died for our sin; if we confess our sin and seek God’s forgiveness, we will have the blessings of joy, strength, courage, and compassion that can only come from God; as well as the blessings of eternal life.

Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches. At times, God as the gardener will prune fruitful branches so that we can bear even more fruit. Some of us may feel we have been through the pruning – it’s painful at times. But let us stay connected to the true vine – our source of power and strength. We are here for a purpose. We are a part of this community for

a reason. We have sustained the storms of change throughout the years and I believe we are seeing the fruits of our labor. God has more in store for us. God is not finished with us yet. Let us renew our commitment to God and dedicate ourselves to bearing good fruit. I'd like to reread part of the scripture from John chapter 15 beginning with verse 11: "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." Verse 16 says, "...you did not choose me but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last." Let us stay connected to the true vine and bear good fruit. Amen.