



Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church
Asheville, North Carolina
10 June 2018
Sermon: "Branching Out"
Outdoor Service & Senior High Graduates Celebration
Rev. Samantha Gonzalez-Block

Psalm 121
John 15:1-17

Note to reader: This was an interactive sermon shared outside on the lawn under a magnificent tree. The sermon is missing the poignant comments shared by the congregation during the sermon.

I want you to take a moment and think of the name of someone who made your life miserable in middle school or high school. *Have you thought of their name?* Now, I want you to think of the name of someone who made your life wonderful in middle school or high school. *Have you thought of their name?*

These are the questions that principal Stevens asked at the Edgemont High School graduation. Her point was this: each of us holds an immense amount of power: power to lift someone up or tear someone down, power to bring about healing or to bring about pain, power to unite or power to isolate. Our power, and how we choose to use it, is something that can affect those around us for the rest of their lives.

In this morning's text, Jesus offers his own sort of graduation remarks to his disciples, as he prepares for his trial and eventual crucifixion. As part of his farewell discourse, he speaks about being God's branches, about being pruned, and about bearing fruit. I wonder if we can think about these things together today. Jesus says: *"I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."*

His words challenge his friends to consider how they will utilize their power. Will they try to go at it alone? Or will they give it over to God and use it to tend to the earth and all who dwell in it? In this moment, Jesus calls them to trust in him like never before, to grow closer to God and to one another: Christ as the vine, they as the branches.

But what does it mean for us to be God's branches?

(I invite you to turn to the person next to you or near you. Please discuss this question).

...God invites us to reach out to each other with fierce tenderness, with world-changing compassion, in order to be extensions of God's love.

All this talk of branches reminds me of a story: There is a Presbyterian church in Texas that recently took a youth trip down to Paraguay. On the plane ride there, their pastor enthusiastically shared that this was going to be a trip focused on relationships. They would be visiting another Presbyterian church, staying in homestays, building friendships with the people there.

When their plane landed, they were welcomed with kisses and gifts and warm sentiments shared in broken English. The Pastor Mateo toured them around the city and then he brought them back to his little church. The building was run down – paint chipped walls, broken windows, dirty floor. But Pastor Mateo shared the space with great pride. He told them about the children’s feeding program, the adult reading classes, the women’s health seminars.

One of American chaperones, named Silvia swung her hand up in the air, “What can we do to help?” she asked.

“Pray for us.” Pastor Mateo said. “Your prayers do a lot of good.”

“No,” she said “What can we do? We’re strong and capable. We want to help fix this place up.”

“That won’t be necessary. He said “We have so much we want to show you.”

“No,” she said. “We’d rather help.”

In Sylvia’s mind, she was being God’s branches – reaching out – with a full heart – wanting to do good. But her eagerness caused her to overstretch, to claim too much space – to miss the point. Within hours, their hosts had spent their own money to go out and buy cleaning supplies, so that this American church group could “help them.” And Silvia posted dozens of pictures of their hard work on social media.

As Christians still living in a white dominant society, we too often forget that we have been taught to believe that those with the most privilege are the ones who get to take up the most space: the ones who are allowed to overstretch, to over-speak, to overprotect. When we allow privilege to dominate, we encroach upon the dignity and agency of those around us. We become unable to listen and learn from others, to make room for equity and authentic connection – to really live as Christ here on earth.

Jesus says to his disciples “Every branch that bears fruit, God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” In essence, our learning and growing is never complete; we still need God to tend to us, to shape us, to ready us.

So, what does it take for us to be pruned? Why is it difficult, what does that require?

(Turn to someone else next to you or near you. Please discuss this question).

...Indeed, God calls us to be branches willing to be pruned, to adapt, to reform in order to better create God’s kingdom here on earth.

Finally, Jesus says to his disciples: “*You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.*” This is a strange idea because fruit doesn’t last. We know from growing our vegetables here in the garden that produce has an expiration date – it eventually gets rotten and moldy and dies. But God calls us to do the impossible: to bear fruit that is somehow sustainable, translatable, that can extend way beyond ourselves.

As we celebrate our graduates today, I am reminded that here at Grace Covenant we are each exploring what fruit we are being called to bear – to listen for the particular ways God is pushing us to respond to the world around us.

Just yesterday, one of our GCPC Senior High youth, Emma Maney sent me a video. She is away at a theological studies camp at Maryville College and the video was of a short sermon that she preached regarding why God loves LGBTQ+ people (meaning folks who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual transgender, queer and more).ⁱ

Her sermon spoke about how Jesus calls those of us, who the world may shun: beloved children of God. I was touched by her words for two reasons: One, that this is a church where a youth can send a video like this to one of her pastors, and know that she will be affirmed and cheered on. And two, that GCPC has been the place where she has learned about the vastness of God’s love, and how to speak about it, and now, how to share it with others in a city far away.

Surely, God needs each of you – each of us – to use our particular gifts to bear sustainable fruit: fruits of justice, fruits of understanding, fruits of laughter, fruits of grace. Fruit that can be taken out and can bring healing and wholeness to those around us.

**So, what sort of fruit do you think the world needs?
And together how can we make this fruit last?**

(Turn to someone else next to you or near you. Please discuss this question).

...We are disciples invited to bear fruit that can do the impossible: break down boundaries, unite across differences, survive the test of the time.

Friends, we are disciples of a God who chooses us
to branch out, to be pruned, to bear long-lasting fruit.

May we trust in a Savior who is our vine:
our sustenance, our foundation, our power, and our joy.

And may we welcome the chance to grow side-by-side,
being nourished by the Spirit,
and being led to wondrous, unexpected places.

ⁱ Emma Maney’s sermon, June 2018: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xIgQYk1qp4Q&feature=youtu.be>