***THE FRUIT DOESN’T FALL FAR FROM THE VINE***

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Texts: John 15:1-11 and 1 John 4:15-16

One of the realities of being John the third, as I am – named after my father and grandfather – is that folks often compare me with my namesakes. “The apple doesn’t’ fall far from the tree,” some will say in noting similarities between us as father and son who have more in common than just our names and a lot of genes. Others seem to believe that “The nut doesn’t fall far from the tree” is more appropriate, but it conveys the same idea, for me and for many others. The iconic philosopher and baseball great Yogi Berra who was renowned for quotes like:

"It ain't over 'til it's over."

"Baseball is 90 percent mental. The other half is physical."

"You can observe a lot by watching."

"No one goes there anymore. It's too crowded."

had a son named Dale who like his dad played professional baseball and once said of their relationship, “Me and my dad are a lot alike, but our similarities are different.” The apple (or nut) doesn’t fall far from the tree.

Jesus does not choose the image of an apple and tree in this passage from John that we heard this morning, but he does not stray far from an agricultural setting. He chooses the image of a vine and branches and the fruit of the vine to help his disciples prepare for what lies ahead just days before he will be taken from them and crucified. For three years they have walked side-by-side with him, listened to him, watched him heal the sick and cast out demons and soothe troubled souls. They have seen him walk on water, calm a storm, and raise Lazarus from the dead. They have gathered around him like family – brothers and sisters bound by their devotion to him and him alone. All of that is about to come to an end as Jesus looks ahead to the cross. It does not matter how often he tells the disciples that he will die and be raised on the third day; they simply won’t or can’t hear what he is telling them. So, as he prepares to leave them and offers his last instructions in what is known as “the farewell discourse” in John, Jesus is aware that if he is no longer present with them in person, the potential exists for them to fragment and go their separate ways. What will hold them together as a family when he is gone?

“I am the true vine, my father is the vinegrower, and you are the branches,” he tells them. “Be fruitful.” The image is one with which his disciples were familiar. It was an image that prophets had used in describing God’s relationship to Israel in the Hebrew Scriptures. Jesus tweaks that Old Testament image to impress upon them his place in their future. The branches draw their sustenance and strength from the vine. Apart from the vine, they die. It is the vine that holds them together and gives them life. “I am the true vine,” he says. If they are to bear fruit, then they must continue to draw strength from him – from what he has taught them and showed them, but especially from the love with which he has embraced them. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Abide in my love,” Jesus tells them. What will hold this family of disciples together is love, the kind of love Jesus has shown them day after day, the kind of love they have for Jesus and Jesus has for them. “Abide in that love,” he says. “Live in that love. Let love be the center of your life together.” His death will be the ultimate expression of his love for them and for the world. It is that kind of love in which they are to live when he is gone. In the words of the hymn: “Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all.”

Some years ago, we were in France with my sister, brother-in-law, and his family. A few of us went on a wine-tasting tour and at one of the stops, the owner took us out into the vineyard to tell us about raising the grapes. I knew next to nothing about the demands of that life, and what impressed me was the amount of handwork that caring for the vines demands. There is constant pruning – all done by hand – that assures that the vines remain strong and the branches can bear the weight of the grapes that will grow. When the sugar level of the grapes reaches the right level – a measurement so precise that harvesting the grapes may be delayed by a single day – the grapes are gathered, again by hand. It is not much different from the way grapes were grown and harvested in Jesus’ day – tender care, intentional pruning, and timing are all crucial in producing a fruitful crop.

The image of God as the vinegrower emphasizes the tender care that we who are the branches receive. Sometimes pruning is necessary. We can’t just grow willy-nillly any way that we want. We are shaped by a God who has given us commandments, purpose, and prophetic guidance for our lives that may limit some of our wild urges and self-destructive tendencies, but is intended by God to make us healthier, happier, and more productive. “My Father is glorified by this,” Jesus says, “that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” And we cannot bear that fruit unless we draw our strength from the one who is the true vine, the one who calls us to abide in his love.

Bearing fruit is the work of discipleship, and the fruits of discipleship are the fruits of the spirit identified by Paul:

love, joy, and peace,

patience and kindness,

generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

They are fruits that were evident in Jesus’ life, and as the vine from which the branches of discipleship grow, we should bear similar fruit – for the fruit does not fall far from the vine! The call to bear those fruits is Christ’s, the true vine who has chosen us to be productive branches. Do you bear that kind of fruit or are you bearing less healthy fruits from a different vine?

For the first twenty years of his life in the mountains of southwest Virginia, Bob Childress was an unproductive branch. The fruits of his labors were drunkenness, gambling, and disturbing the peace. School meant little to him and the church even less. He was a prime candidate for pruning and burning by the divine vinekeeper. But God was at work in his life and fruitful days were yet to come. His first wife brought him into the church, and when her death left him with two small children, Bob Childress struggled on. He often remarked that the Devil threw him sixteen times, but Christ triumphed. That triumph was a call to ministry that he could not resist. He was admitted to Davidson College though he hadn’t graduated from high school and then enrolled at Union Seminary while supporting his new wife and five children.

Upon his graduation from seminary, Bob declined an opportunity to serve an urban church that offered him a beautiful manse and new car; he returned to the mountains from which he came to live in a tiny home and serve the Buffalo Mountain Presbyterian Church. Over the next thirty years, Bob Childress served that church and built five other stone churches within a radius of 26 miles of the Buffalo Mountain Church. He preached Christ and touched the lives of countless mountain people with God’s grace and love. His story is told in *The Man Who Moved a Mountain*; it is the story of a branch that bore abundant fruit in the corner of God’s vineyard that lies in the mountains of southwest Virginia.

Not all of us are called to minister in such dramatic ways or to build stone churches; the fruits we bear will not necessarily be the subject of books. Not all branches will produce equally. But each of us is called to use our gifts – whatever they may be – to God’s glory by bearing fruit as faithful disciples where we are or where God sends us. God doesn’t compare branches, and neither should we. About the time we consider boasting, “My fruit is looking a little better than yours,” God is inclined to do a little pruning – of us! God simply asks that we be faithful and bear fruit as branches of the true vine, abiding in Christ and loving our neighbors to the glory of God. That is our common calling as individuals and as a church – to abide in Christ and his love and to be faithful disciples who bear fruit to God’s glory.

There are those who would have you graft yourself to their vines with promises of a fruitful harvest of wealth and power, unrestrained pleasures or hateful prejudices, revenge on your enemies and glory for your group, your nation, or yourself. But those vines will wither and die as will the branches who draw their sustenance from them. For they are not the true vine, and the fruit of those branches falls far from the vine who is Christ and rots where it falls.

If you would be a disciple of Jesus, a fruitful disciple, then abide in his love. Live in his love by loving as he loved, by loving those among whom you live. Love not just those who are easy to love, but also those who are hard to love and those who nobody seems to love. Love them with love that is as tangible as a touch or a helping hand or a gracious word of forgiveness or an invitation to your table. For the fruit does not fall far from the vine, and if we are to be fruitful in God’s vineyard, then we must remain close to the true vine, abide in him, and abide in his love. For God is love and those who abide in love abide in God – and God abides in them – says John, says Jesus. What say you? Amen