

There will be two parts to this sermon today. My part, the sermon and your part, participating in our Wesleyan Covenant Renewal. First my part...the sermon.

Growing up in Iowa, in January it was hard to imagine a garden filled with luscious vegetables and bushes laden with fruit. Cold for sure, sometimes enough to freeze your nostrils! Snow on the ground, most likely. Bare trees, muddy ground, grey snow on the sides of the road. Yuck!

And yet this was precisely the time of year that the Burpee seed catalog would show up along with The Old Farmer's Almanac. Who still gets an Almanac? For those who are hearing about this magical magazine for the first time, The Almanac was loaded with very important information: moon phases, tides, fishing forecasts, regional weather forecasts. Surprisingly quite accurate forecasts. It also included short articles.

I remember an article I read about how to grow a huge pumpkin. One worthy of the county fair blue ribbon. First, you have to trim all but one pumpkin per vine. That focuses all of the vine's energy onto one fruit.

Next you need to baby your pumpkin. No you don't need to put on a bib. But you do need to keep an eye on it so that it doesn't get too much sun. The sun might burn and damage the top. You also need to make sure its underside isn't sitting in mud. You don't want your pumpkin to have a rotten underbelly.

Finally, you need to keep a close watch on the pumpkin's connection to the vine. Pumpkins can grow in such a way that they can actually snap themselves from the vine. When that happens, it's all over.

In our passage today, Jesus also uses the metaphor of a vine. He describes a grapevine in a vineyard with Jesus as the vine and his Father as the vine grower. Like our pumpkin, tending grapevines are important. They also need pruning. They need to be cleared of excessive branches to encourage vigor.

A while back, I bought a tree from a nursery. Part of the service included the delivery and planting of that tree. One the delivery day someone from the nursery arrived, dug a hole in the yard and planted that tree. Before he left, he asked me, “Would you like me to prune the tree for you?” It seemed like a good idea, so I said, “Sure, thanks.”

He started pruning the tree. He pruned and he pruned and he pruned. I thought it was a joke. He was cutting the whole tree away. Finally the man stopped pruning. He saw me looking over the tree. It was a pathetic, former shadow of itself. “You killed my tree!

The tree guy looked at me, “I know, I took a lot off. I always ask people if they want me to prune their tree before I leave. You see, you really need to cut back on them when they’re transplanted. And as the new owner, I knew you wouldn’t have the heart to cut away what needs to go.”

As people of faith, we’re connected into Christ’s vine, right? So what does pruning mean for us? Do we have the heart to cut away what needs to go?

Are you overextended? Not enough energy to do justice to all the projects you’ve got going. Feeling drained and exhausted. Maybe this is where you need the pruning.

What about behaviors that are destructive. Pulling you down and preventing you from bearing good fruit.

How do we identify these behaviors? How do we raise our self- awareness so we can recognize them? Are you jealous? Are you angry? Do you have obsessive thoughts sapping your energy? Let’s take 30 seconds and reflect on what might need pruning.

There is a very old spiritual practice called The Examen. The Examen originated from the Jesuit community. It’s a simple practice. At the end of each day, you are asked to take a few moments

to reflect on that day. Make it an intentional time to consider your inner self. Like a mirror shows us our outward appearance, the Examen shows us our inner lives.

During this time you simply place yourself in God's presence. Then you give thanks for the grace and tender mercies filling your life. After that you review the day that's drawing to a close. Just a brief walk through your day, taking account of what has happened. As you do, focus on your feelings. How did you respond in particular situations? What drew you closer to God? What pulled you away from God? Think about what you might want to change going forward. Lift up your day to God and then look forward to tomorrow.

That's it. Pretty basic right? But doesn't presenting your day to God who is the great vinedresser sound essential. To let God point out the things in need of pruning and to take it one day at a time.

That's the pruning. But the other critical item is the connection to the vine. If the pumpkin breaks away from its vine, that's it – no more growth. It must abide.

In our passage from John's gospel, Jesus uses the word "abide" no less than eight times! "Abide in me as I abide in you." Jesus tells his disciples that it is impossible for the branches to bear fruit unless they abide in the vine. The vine is the source of life. The vine provides the energy that fuels the branches.

John really likes this abiding thing! In his first letter he uses the word abide 16 times! For example, 1 John 4:16 says, "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them. Abiding is critical to John! John makes it clear that abiding in God is essential.

As God's children, what fruit are we to bear? We just read it from that passage of 1 John. God is love. When we are connected to the God-vine, the fruit we bear is love. And if you think John went overboard in repeating the word "abide," that's nothing compared to his use of "love!" In today's reading, John repeats the word "love" 27 times!

God is love, period. Love is the heart and soul of everything. God is love, and when we ABIDE in God, when we're tapped into God, that divine love will course through and fill us. Abiding in that love, we bear fruit. Our lives turn into God's love. As we abide in God, divine love shapes the fruits of love in our actions within this beautiful world. We act in love, we speak in love, we frame our thoughts within the canopy of God's love.

Even the most well-tended branch may come up against forces pressing to break our connection. Other influences; other voices that twist about with false narratives. Whispering to us. Telling us that we're not loved or worse not lovable. They try to convince us that we're falling short, not trying hard enough, that we'll never measure up. They try to point us against our neighbor. Try to raise suspicions, mistrust, hatred and prejudice. Feeding us with fears of dangers and threats.

Our connection to God's vine becomes strained. We begin to wither inside. The goodness and love of God goes from a constant flow to a trickle. And that is why John urges us to ABIDE. Abide in God.

Charles Wesley, brother of John Wesley and gifted hymn writer gave us the beautiful hymn "Love Divine, All Loves Excelling." I'd call it an ode to abiding in God. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

"Fix in us thy humble dwelling, all thy faithful mercies crown." I don't know about you, but that sounds like abiding.

"Breathe, oh, breathe the loving Spirit into ev'ry troubled breast." When those twisting voices whisper in our ears and trouble our hearts, the grace of God comes through the Holy Spirit to renew our connection to the holy vine. So that we may continue to abide.

Let us pray:

Finish then thy new creation, pure and spotless let us be;
let us see thy great salvation perfectly restored in thee!
Changed from glory into glory, till in heaven we take our place,
Till we cast our crowns before thee; lost in wonder, love, and praise.

Now for your part. But first let me say a bit about this service. We must start by travelling back in time to 1660. There we will meet up with a Puritan by the name of Richard Alleine. He wrote a book called “A Vindication of Godliness in the Greater Strictness and Spirituality of It”. Sounds serious, doesn’t it? Well the Puritan archbishop of the time didn’t think so, because he rejected it. But it caught the attention of John Wesley a century later.

From this publication the covenant prayer was born. It was adopted into the growing Methodist movement in 1755.

In London they began to make this a ritual service for New Year's Day. The heart of the service, focused in the Covenant Prayer, leads us to a renewed commitment to God. So this should be taken seriously.

As your pastor, I commit to the responsibility of assisting you as lay members to engage in a variety of spiritual disciplines.

We will now proceed with the liturgy. You should all have a copy of the covenant. After we complete the liturgy, I will give you a few moments to reflect and then sign your covenant. These are yours to take home and put in a place where you can see them.