



The last congregation I served with was in the middle of vineyards galore. Being alongside Lake Michigan, these upcoming few months were always the prime time of year for their local blueberries, peaches, not to mention the most intoxicating aroma of all the grapes in the fields surrounding the rural roads. So, it only made perfect sense that behind their altar in the sanctuary was this massive vine with symbols spread throughout of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. As if to remind the person coming into worship on a Sunday morning, or for a funeral during the week, and even a not-often church-goer for a Saturday wedding; that regardless, you are part of this most wonderful, most beautiful, most captivating union with Jesus Christ, whose love for you can never, ever be cut off.

Now, although we were nearby several immensely successful wineries, we used the good 'ole Mogen David wines that can be bought in stores all over the country. Nevertheless, there was still something special about celebrating Communion in front of that massive vine, as if the real fruit of it all was not from any vineyard near or far away, but from the love of God in Christ Jesus, our Lord. For we do not simply taste and see whatever wine or grape juice when we partake of the Lord's holy Supper, we taste and see just how much God will go to the most extensive lengths imaginable to show us just how much we are cherished: that not even death or time or sin or fear or anything else will ever separate us from the most precious life-giving vine in Jesus Christ.

Except, we have our moments of wondering if that is really true. The Gospel passage we heard this morning has its troubling verses intertwined that make us ask if it really is "good news" for us human beings, who have our moments of not bearing fruits of joy, peace, and kindness. We may not ask the question out loud, but deep down, even while staring at a lovely God-infused vine, or a portrayal of a world-inclusive Jesus, or a cross proclaiming victory over sin and death; regardless, we still have our moments, and we ask in the silence of our hearts "are we going to be those very branches that are cut off completely, never to be tended again?"

And yet, as incredibly eye-catching as that vine was soaring behind the altar in the sanctuary, there was another beautiful depiction of this Gospel passage in a different spot that was often overlooked. It was immediately when you walked in the main entrance doors to the church building, and to the right there was this bench that was not used all that often really. But at the top of that bench were these artistic renderings of grapes and vines and branches. That often overlooked, but still beautiful spot, was used mostly by our youth as they waited for their parents or other family to pick them up. From that most precious seat came the conversations they may not have been so comfortable to have in front of their peers, let alone the adults. All these young people who wondered if they were good enough to be popular in school, were they mature enough for the standards of their family, did they do enough to be able to move on from high school into whatever was next for them, and yes, were they good enough, did they bear enough fruit, to be included in this, evidently, exclusive, even intimidating, vine of Jesus Christ.

So, it was not so much in front of the massive vine behind the altar that they heard the Gospel. It was from that overlooked bench with the colorful grapes and vines, that they had to hear the Great News that applied to them just as much as anyone else who walked into that building. As if the fruit that surrounded them on that precious seat, was not meant to symbolize the fruit they were expected to pull off in their adolescent years, or even throughout their lives. The fruit was not even about all the majestic vineyards around them. No, it was about God's ultimate fruition of love that was brought to life in Jesus Christ not for a select few, not just for those who mastered joy, peace, kindness, and whatever else. This most precious fruit of God's love was meant for the whole world, including the doubters and the worriers, the scared-out-of-their-mind people in the middle of the night, and those who do not wish to ask such eternal faith questions in front of others.

I know this passage can be manipulated to convince others they are not good enough; that they are not producing near enough of their own fruit to impress the holy vine-grower. However, I have this feeling the cross changed things. I have this sneaking suspicion that the most holy fruit was unleashed from the heights of Calvary into the utter depths of our soul, and at that moment, God further grafted us into the vine of Jesus Christ, and boldly insisted to never, ever let us go. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen.