

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

“I Am the True Vine”

Sunday, March 21, 2021

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Welcome and Announcements

Hi, everyone, and welcome to worship of God at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth.

Today is Sunday, March 21st and it is the 5th Sunday of Lent. I am joined in worship this morning by Darlene Maginley and Pastor Emily. Of course, I want to give a special thanks to Susan Underhill and her editing and video skills that make this online service possible. Our musician this morning will be Geff Phillips.

I have a couple of announcements to share with you all, so buckle in and we'll get right to them. The first pertains to the fact that, as this *is* the 5th Sunday of Lent, we are nearing the end of this season, and entering into Holy Week. We have a lot of exciting opportunities to worship together, both online and in person.

The first opportunity will be next Sunday, March 28th, as it is Palm Sunday and we will have our regular online service and our regular 10:00 AM parking lot worship service, as well. We do have special music that morning. The bells will be playing live at our 10:00 a.m. parking lot service so that will be really exciting for them to share their gifts with us, next Sunday, March 28th for Palm Sunday.

On Thursday, April 1st, we will observe Maundy Thursday with an online service only. For that special event, we will have a special guest preaching for us and that is my husband Brendan Ashley.

The following day is Friday, April 2nd, and we will hold our Good Friday service, also online only. We will hear from multiple voices in our church as they go through the last words of Jesus.

Finally, on April 4th we will celebrate Easter Sunday, the resurrection of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, with both an online worship service, that will become available that morning, *and* that morning we will have two parking lot services! We will have a 9:00 a.m. service and an 11:00 a.m. service. Now those two parking lot services are the same so you don't have to worry about picking one over the other. We have special music that is planned for both of those services. Our Chancel Choir will be making a special guest appearance as well as the brass ensemble, so it'll be a lovely morning of worshipping the resurrection of our God. I'm looking forward to it and I'm sure you all are, as well.

I want to remind you all to sign up online. Register your cars for any of those parking lot services, so that we can plan for your arrival.

Okay. I have a couple other announcements for you this morning. They pertain to the Deacons. First, the Deacons will host a “Keep it Clean” drive for the Salvation Army next Saturday, March 27th, from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. in the church parking lot. A list of the

items they will be collecting is available in the bulletin. The second item I have also pertains to the Deacons. As we all know, this past year, things have been strange and a little different, but one thing has definitely remained true, and that is that our Deacons have been working hard to serve God and serve our community, and we are thankful for that.

But because things have been a little different we have not had the opportunity to recognize the fifth Sunday of the month, or the “Deacons’ Sunday,” to collect offerings to support the Deacons and their work. So as we enter into Holy Week and we are celebrating the great love that God has for us, we are providing an opportunity to take a special offering for the Deacons, so that they may continue spreading that love to our communities. I encourage you to take a look in the bulletin or in the Friday newsletter. There are different opportunities to give, both online, or by mailing in your offering. Also there will be a special collection on Easter Sunday, April 4th. Take a look in the bulletin. There's also a list of all the different things the Deacons are doing, which is a wonderful reminder.

So with that, friends, it gives me great joy to be in worship with you all today. Whether we are in person in the parking lot or online, we are united by Christ and by the Spirit and one of the ways we are united is in prayer. I encourage you now to join me in our opening prayer. Let us pray.

Lord of Mercy, who sent Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost. We confess that we have strayed from you and turned aside from your way. We are misled by pride for we see ourselves as perfect when we are imperfect, and great when we are small. We have failed to love, neglected justice, and ignored your truth. Have mercy, oh God, and forgive our sins. Return us to paths of righteousness; keep our feet firmly in the way that you lead. Make our mouths speak the truth that you teach and fill our bodies with the life that you bring. We pray all of this in the name of our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ. Amen.

[Geff Phillips plays and sings “Draw Me Close To You”]

Darlene Maginley, Directory of Children’s Ministry – Children’s Message

Good morning, kids! How are you today?

So I have this big, beautiful Sycamore tree in my front yard. It doesn't have leaves on it yet this year. The other day we had a little bit of wind, and when I went out into my yard what did I find but all of these sticks that had blown out of my Sycamore tree.

Well, I was thinking about our Bible verse for today where Jesus says I am the true vine. Well, we don't really have a lot of grape vines in our area of Michigan, so I was thinking about my Sycamore tree. Now if this branch hadn't fallen out of my Sycamore tree, it probably would have grown beautiful leaves. The leaves on a Sycamore tree are huge! They are about as big paper plates.

Well, that's a lot like our lives. Our lives can be like that sometimes. Our lives can be such a mess that we cause problems for other people, But if we stay connected to Jesus, our lives are like the Sycamore tree when it grows beautiful leaves and that creates shade for people, or maybe a fruit tree that will grow fruit to feed people. That's the way our lives are--if we stay with God and Jesus. The fruit of the spirit grows within us so that we can share that beautiful fruit with others.

Let's pray together. Dear Jesus, thank you for being our true vine. Thank you for helping us stay connected to God and for giving us the power to grow fruit in our lives that we can share with other people. Please help us to stay connected to you so that our lives can be beautiful and fruitful. It's in your name that we pray. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sacrament of Baptism

Ryan James Dornik, son of Elizabeth and Nick Dornik

Ashley S. Ashley, Associate Pastor — Scripture Reading

John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”

Friends, this is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Sermon: “I Am the True Vine”

Would you all please pray with me. Loving God, it is difficult for us at times to believe that you chose us so that we could bear fruit in your name. Help us to understand your choice and help us to be open to the working of your Spirit within us even now. This we pray in Jesus’ name. Amen.

Friends, there is a certain amount of irony that can be found in my preaching on a scripture passage all about gardening! There are at least two whole committees within this church— our Earth Care committee and our Adopt-a-Bed Gardening Committee, whose members are better qualified to preach on this topic than I am. The fact that our Earth Care Committee, just this week, received an award from our denomination for upholding our official PC(USA) Earth Care status should be celebrated, I think, by inviting members of that committee to preach on the subject of gardening. We would all benefit from their knowledge of the care of our world and, certainly, of our church.

The last time I tried my hand at gardening, I have to tell you that I acted out of frustration. I have several large Oak Leaf Hydrangea bushes in my backyard and I pruned them back very heavily last spring. They were simply getting way too large and I wanted to sort of contain their growth. Well, apparently I pruned at the wrong time, because even though it was early, early spring, I somehow managed to stop the plant from producing any flowers throughout the entire summer! And what was even worse than that, is that I had cut it back in order to make each plant smaller and each plant actually ended up, through last summer, growing twice as large as it had been.

God is a master gardener who knows exactly what He is doing. God speaks to us about the gardening process in John chapter 15 and, thankfully, for me at least, about half of what is spoken about in that chapter is actually referring to a deep theological metaphor that grows out of the Old Testament.

At least on this subject I feel somewhat knowledgeable and able to speak. The second half of the passage, which does speak about the importance of gardening and pruning things in our own lives, I will approach with great fear and trepidation in just a few minutes.

But, first, John, chapter 15, at verse 1, begins with Jesus saying,

“I am the true vine and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.”

Well, the fact that Jesus refers to himself as the true vine suggests that there is also a vine that is false. In the Old Testament the grapevine was always used as a symbol of the nation of Israel, in the same way that we may use a bald eagle to symbolize our own nation. That grapevine, even today, represents Israel.

Psalm 80, at verse 8, states,

You transplanted a vine from Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.

God's vine which came out of Egypt was the nation of Israel. Now, unfortunately, the people of Israel neglected to keep the vine nourished, and as a result they ended up going wild, and losing their fruit, and we see this spoken of in Psalm 80, at verse 12 and 13.

There it says all who pass along the way pluck up the fruit, meaning the fruit of the vine.

Why have you broken down its walls
so that all who pass by pick its grapes?
Boars from the forest ravage it,
and insects from the fields feed on it.

The prophet Jeremiah goes on to say that the vine of Israel has simply become wild. In Jeremiah, chapter 2, it says, God planted a choice vine, holy of pure seed, but how then has that vine turned degenerate and become a wild vine. Clearly God had “grape” expectations, if you get that, for the people of Israel, but the nation of Israel were not, on their own, able to remain close to God.

This is why Jesus says in John, chapter 15, at verse 1, “I am the true vine.” In other words, I am the chosen one by God, the means by which all people can draw close to God. No longer did someone need to be part of a particular nation in order to draw near to God. As long as we remain close to Christ we remain close to God.

As we abide and remain in Christ, we, too, become part of God's chosen family. This is the message of John 15. The fact that Jesus is our true Vine means that Jesus brings us into a relationship with God as part of God's family but just as there were expectations on the nation of Israel to remain or abide in a relationship with God, there are similar expectations on us to remain or abide in Christ. In John, chapter 15, at verse 5, Jesus says there, “I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, but

apart from me you can do nothing.” We saw a demonstration of what it means to be apart from God or Christ in Darlene's children sermon today.

Friends, we now return our thoughts to what it means to garden and to allow Christ and God to take part in a gardening or pruning process in our own lives. What is it exactly that God expects from us in the passage? The passage says that we will bear much fruit from the branches closely linked to Christ, but what type of fruit is God looking for?

Well, friends, today, I believe if you ask ten different people what type of fruit God expects from us, depending on the denomination and background, you may get ten different answers. I would imagine, though, that many people would say that the fruit God expects of us is to grow other disciples of Christ and that certainly is one means of measuring a “crop.”

But let me ask you this: If your life were to end tomorrow, what evidence in your life exists today that speaks of your faith? Obviously, for many people watching our service today, one of those answers is, “I spend time in worship.” It may also be that “I'm a member of this church or some other church.” That is some of the evidence in my life that I have a faith. For others, it goes beyond that. It involves praying on a regular basis or reading scripture or being part of a Bible study or serving in various outreach ministries.

In the past twelve months many of us have had to develop new ways of drawing near to God as old pathways were no longer available to us. The evidence of our lives, the fruit of our lives, is what people would say about our faith at the end of our lives. How we treat people reflects our faith. How we respond to a crisis reflects our faith. How we spend our time, how we spend our money all speak, or fail to speak, about our faith.

God doesn't ever give us exact standards or expectations. We are never told each person who abides in Christ is expected to produce five different kinds of fruit. What God simply says, and says it repeatedly, is “abide,” or as it says in our translation today, “remain.” We are told again and again and *again* that we are to *remain* in Christ. If we remain in Christ, we will bear much fruit.

It says in verse 5, if we remain in Christ and in Christ's Word, then we can ask God whatever we wish. It says in verse 7, if we remain in Christ's love, as it says in verse 9, and then repeats it again in verse 9, we will remain close to God.

If we can remain close to the person of Jesus Christ in every aspect of our lives, how we spend our time and who we spend our time with, and how we handle crisis in life, and how we spend our money, how we prepare for the end of our lives, all of this will speak of our faith and become the *fruit* of our lives, the fruit of our relationship with Jesus Christ, which in turn, reflects our relationship with God. We are blessed to have the opportunity to draw near to God, to be part of God's Holy Family, through our relationship with Christ.

We are called by the master gardener to abide, to live close to Christ. In order to live close to Christ, we also, at times, need to allow God to incorporate a pruning process within our lives. That means that God needs to prune back those areas in our lives that maybe distract us or take us away from things related to God. For each of us that may be different.

I will tell you in the amount of knowledge I have sought to learn about pruning for this sermon, I have learned that the proper way to prune is to take away any branch that doesn't point to the light. So any branch that grows sideways or grows down to the ground and

doesn't reach up and outwards towards the light is to be pruned away. By pruning away those branches, it actually makes the ones remaining much stronger.

In the same way, God wants us to have different aspects of our real lives that spread out but also lift up to the sun, not just the sun in the sky, but to God's Son. Each of us need to examine what God may be calling us to prune back. Each of us need to examine what fruit we have to offer God. It's a big job but yet God has not left us alone in it. It is a job where we have not just our own strength and wisdom, but we have the strength of the master gardener who keeps us forever in His heavenly care. Amen.

Geff Phillips plays and sings "In Christ Alone"

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Prayers of the People and the Lord's Prayer

Would you all please pray with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for being the perfect gardener. Thank you for caring for our lives, for nourishing our spirit. We thank you for loving us so much that you invite us to grow as part of your family.

We pray that you would help us to accept pruning in our lives and in our church where needed. We pray that you would help us to provide evidence of your love and grace to others through our living. We pray as well today for anyone who is feeling far from you. Grow near to them we pray. We pray, as well, for anyone who is hurting in body, mind or spirit. Please bring help and healing, hope and peace to all who are in distress.

We pray for our world. We continue to pray for an end for this pandemic. We continue to pray for an end of racial divisions, for an end to all injustice, to oppression and evil.

Holy God, may the fruit of our lives reflect the love grace and peace you offer us so generously. This we pray in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord, who has taught us to pray together,

Our Father who art in heaven,
hallowed be thy name.
Thy Kingdom come, thy will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation,
but deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom,
and the power and the glory forever.
Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Benediction and Blessing

Friends, stay close to God. Abide in His presence always, so that our lives may grow to reflect His love grace and compassion always.

And as we go our separate ways today, may the blessing of God almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, rest upon you and upon all those whom you love, this day and forevermore.
Amen.