

“The Gnarly Old Vine”  
Stouffville United Church  
Sunday, May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8

The gnarly old vine. The old grape vine at the back of my house on the farm in Mount Albert is nothing like the beautifully pruned grape vine that Jean Painter has on her property and which she used today for our sermon picture. She has carefully pruned back last year’s branches which will encourage strong new growth for this season’s grape harvest! The gnarly old vine at my farm is a holy mess of branches and it’s only when you get down on your hands and knees and peak under the thick matt of twisted branches that you see the gnarly old vine. There are actually two of them, growing beside two old rusted metal posts which hold a wire between them, on which this twisted mass of branches rests for support. While the old grape vine doesn’t offer much in the grape department, it does provide a beautiful spot for birds to nest in. In the height of its summer growth, the branches wave into the air, long tendrils reaching out to grasp anything for support.

A disciple asks Jesus, “Lord, how is it that you will reveal yourself to us?” Jesus uses the image of the vine to explain the way in which he will be revealed to his followers. “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.” “I am the vine; you are the branches.” “Abide in me as I abide in you.” The image of the vine and the branches is a metaphor for the Christian community, where we are in Christ and Christ is in us. The language is simple and helps us to understand the relational aspect of the Christian community. You look at the vine and see that the branch is part of the vine, and conversely, the vine is part of the branch. That while the branch grows from the vine, it is of the vine. It is an organic relationship. Likewise, when Jesus says, I abide in you and you in me, is to say that we are not ‘added on’ or ‘attached’ but are ‘of’, and ‘in’. We are ‘in Christ.’

If I think of Christ as the vine and the church as the branches, over the centuries, the church has faced harsh pruning, and periods of dormancy and drought, but it has always believed that hope is in the vine. Perhaps this hope stems from the image of the stump of Jesse from the Prophet Isaiah. In the Book of Isaiah, Chapter 11, we read, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse; and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” (Isaiah 11:1) The tree that had been long dead, with nothing remaining but a stump, now grows a shoot; a branch grows out of the roots. And Isaiah blesses this branch, saying, “The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might.” And this branch of lineage will continue from Jesse, to his son David, and on down through the generations to Joseph, who is the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born. From this tender shoot comes the promise that is revealed in Jesus. I am the vine, Jesus says. Even though the stump was dead, the tender shoot emerged. Even though the vine is heavily pruned, new life emerges. The hope is in the vine.

Yesterday, Barb Hendren and I attended a ‘virtual’ United Church of Canada ‘Town Hall’, hosted by our Moderator, the Right Rev. Richard Bott. The church is holding town halls to gather preliminary thoughts for the church’s strategic planning for 2022-2024. The backdrop for our conversations was a review of the contextual realities in our world today – from the growing

awareness of climate crisis, and social justice work for indigenous peoples, and anti-black and anti-Asian work. To the secularization of society. And most recently to the year long impact of the pandemic. How are we called to be church against this backdrop? The Town Hall presented three ‘branches’ to consider – each one growing in a different direction. One branch supports the efforts of the grassroots church, in the connecting of communities of faith at the ground level. Another branch links with ecumenical partners, deepening these relationships globally. The third branch lifts up the distinctive voice of our denomination, as being bold and creative in many initiatives. Each of these branches are growing into unknown territory. And I imagine it like the long branches of my grape vine on the farm, its branches waving in the air, with those tendrils reaching out for something to hold on to.

As a church, we look at these branches and wonder what do we do? The pruner in us holds the pruning shears in our hand and eyes the branch, saying I wonder if I should cut this one away. It’s a little wild looking, a little unruly, too unpredictable for our comfort zone. Maybe the pruner’s inclination is to have their vine looking the way it’s always looked. Tamed, controlled, manageable, in its place.

I learned a new term this week – the ‘inherited church’ - which comes from the Fresh Expressions movement in England. From the Fresh Expression website, I read, “Inherited church speaks of the orderly process by which a generation passes the faith ... in a particular local church, to the next generation or two.”<sup>1</sup> A colleague explained it better, “Everything we think of, buildings, Sunday morning worship, are all inherited from the keepers of the faith before us.”<sup>2</sup>

Stouffville United’s constitution begins with this preface: “God gave to the Spiritual Ancestors of the current congregation of Stouffville United Church the desire to form a worshipping community that could carry on the legacy of their beliefs throughout the coming generations. Since that day, those successive generations have taken on the task of maintaining and strengthening the nature of that worshipping community in their own era. Our own generation is no less determined than the previous ones to ensure that Stouffville United Church remains true to its Christian roots, provides for the needs of its current members and wills to generations yet to come their own opportunity to carry the cross of Christian ministry and fellowship in this area.”<sup>3</sup>

Each successive generation of members of this church have had to do some pruning because of the contextual realities they faced. From the Depression Years of the 1930s, to two world wars, and most recently to the pandemic we’re in the midst of now. And yet, this one thing remains the same – each generation is part of the vine. Each generation has experienced the hardship of pruning. Look at our pruning this year! Would you have imagined a year ago that our gathering here in person would have *not* happened for over a year? And yet, here we are, gathering as community through live-streaming. Each successive generation has received nourishment from the vine, especially in times of harsh pruning, nourishment in the form of faith, love, and most importantly, hope. This is not the same church it was back in 1853. It is not

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<sup>1</sup> [Attractional Church, Missional Church and the End of the Home Field Advantage - Fresh Expressions US](#), accessed May 1, 2021.

<sup>2</sup> From an email from Tay Moss, Innovative Ministry Center, April 30, 2021.

<sup>3</sup> From the Constitution of Stouffville United Church.

the same church it was five years ago, or even a year ago. It is always evolving into the next expression of a Christian presence in a changing cultural context. But it is also always part of the vine that connects all Christians to each other, and to Christ.

The unruly, uncontrollable new growth in the vine is the complication in our life right now. We need to remember to be faithful, that in the pruning, new life flourishes. To be 'in Christ' is to be living, growing, changing, adapting. That no matter how much the church seems to change, it is nourished by the vine, which is Christ.

The vine sends forth new branches. It cannot, will not, stay the way it was with the growth of yester year. But it grows towards what is next. The vine grows into its promise. It's like the words of a hymn we love to sing, "In the bulb there is a flower, in the seed an apple tree ... unrevealed until its season, something God alone can see."<sup>4</sup>

Thanks be to God. Amen.

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<sup>4</sup> "In the Bulb There is a Flower" Hymn 703, Verse 1, Voices United Hymnal