

“We choose our friends, we choose our enemies, but God chooses our neighbors.”

I quoted this statement by G. K. Chesterton, a British writer and theologian, when I greeted our new neighbors at the taping of AHC, Inc.’s official opening of The Spire this week. They got the short version because I had only been allotted two minutes to speak. (Lucky you: YOU get the 10-minute version.)



I told **them** that WE at Church of the Resurrection had chosen AHC to be our neighbor for at least the next 65 years. We had chosen them after interviewing some dozen other potential affordable housing developers, entrusting them with our vision for our future due to their track record of success in helping their affordable housing tenants succeed in life. “Of course,” I said, “God had introduced us.”

I’m telling you of this event because it bears on today’s gospel lesson. Or maybe it’s the other way around. Maybe it’s today’s gospel lesson that bears on the concept of being connected. The lesson says, and I’ll paraphrase:

“To do God’s will,” Jesus said, “I have aligned myself integrally with God. And God has purified me to do his will by removing that which would distract me from such an intimate connection with God. As for you,” Jesus added, “align yourselves integrally with me, because without me you cannot possibly succeed long-term in knowing and doing God’s will.”

Of course, being Jesus, he said all this in a parable. His analogy was to a vine, with branches, whose evidence of interior health is to “bear fruit.” Notice here that bearing fruit isn’t our goal. Our goal is to become and remain connected with God and each other. Bearing fruit is the natural consequence of being connected in this way:

- God is the vine-grower, the one who creates and lovingly tends the vine, the one who removes every branch from the vine that doesn't bear fruit. Just as you gardeners will know, pruning is essential for healthy growth.
- Christ Jesus is the vine. He's the one God has groomed to collect and feed the vine's branches. As the vine, Christ Jesus gives us the ability to join in close relationship with God.
- We are the branches, the ones who “abide in” the vine and thus “bear fruit,” or who do not “abide in the vine” and therefore do not bear fruit and thus die.

Our lesson today doesn't specifically identify what the “fruit” of the vine is. However, we know from other scripture (specifically from Paul's letters) that the fruit of the vine is the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, forbearance, gentleness, goodness, faith, mildness, and temperance. The fruit we bear isn't so much the help we give to others as it is how we live in relationship with each other.

Jesus used this parable of the vine and the vine-grower to tell us we can only bear fruit if we abide in him. And, just like a single branch can't produce fruit on its own, Jesus says neither can we, at least for very long. Soon, the creative energy that sustains us is used up when we remove ourselves from each other, or remove ourselves from him, or try to be the vine ourselves.

In Jesus' parable, the death of unproductive branches is more graphic than merely dying. Today's lesson reminds us that dead things are “thrown into the fire and burned.” This is descriptive—a statement of fact—rather than prescriptive. We can't be scared into bearing fruit. Instead, we are warned that the fate of dead things is death, whereas the fate of living things is life.

Let me tell this hard truth another way. I once knew a person (may she rest in peace) an exemplary Christ-follower, who would help anyone who needed helping, whether they asked or not. But she stopped going to church, deciding the best way to commune with

God was through her appreciation of the great outdoors—God’s creation—without the distraction of other people. It would have been OK for a while. But before long, she began to think people were taking advantage of her generosity, even while she continued to help them.

We might think that “bearing fruit” is about helping others. If so, this woman continued to bear fruit. But is this the way we are to measure ourselves? Perhaps. But Jesus isn’t talking here in his vine parable about how much fruit we produce. He is urging us to be deeply connected, rooted in the giver of life and connected to each other as healthy branches of the same healthy vine. We don’t get to prune the vine.

Just like fruit on a vine attests to inner life and health, spiritual fruit in us is borne from living connected lives. We are be connected to each other and to the vine-grower. And when we are connected in integral ways, we help others, not to benefit ourselves or to convince others that we are spiritually fit. Instead, bearing spiritual fruit is a natural consequence of our connectedness. We see ourselves as fellow branches of the same vine and our vine is the author of life itself.

What Jesus asks of us today, by his parable is to evaluate our own lives:

- Are we connected with each other?
- Do we stay rooted in God and Christ Jesus?
- Are we truly alive, which is to say, do we exude love and joy and peace and the other fruits of the Spirit, or are we dried up, disconnected?
- Are we in union with, open to every neighbor God sends our way, with those who live in The Spire... and in Goodwin House? And
- Will we choose those we meet as friends, loving our neighbors as ourselves? Not “What can we do for them?” but “How will we be in relationship with them?”

These are hard questions, but our answers are very important.

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