

Please join me in prayer.

Hide me in your glory, gracious and loving God. And may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, my redeemer, and my refuge. Amen.

Today's passage resonates with those who are into gardening or planting. In one of my first sermons, I mentioned that I once unfortunately ended the lives of my grandma's orchids and did not explore into growing anything or maintaining until 2018. And last year, because of the pandemic, I tried planting some, which grew until it got cold...so I will figure out what to do with my garden pots this year when it is officially warm. I was able to grow some onions and herbs, hopefully I will be successful this year as well. And I would also like to mention that the succulent that Kathy Johnson gave me already have flowers. But I am still a newbie in planting/gardening and so much to learn.

One of the things that I have learned in gardening is that the part of the 'branches' that are closer to the main plant is greener and healthier than the ones that are branching out. This is why pruning is very important. For all the gardening/planting folks out there, I believe that they are doing this to make sure that their plants grow up healthy. I think I did that, too, especially when I notice that the ends are turning brown. I also observed that my plant grew faster. As I reflect on this practice, I think about the phrase 'hang in there'. I believe most of us have said this as words of encouragement to folks who are experiencing difficulties in life. We say 'hang in there' to encourage the person that better things are to come, but I do not think that pruning is an appropriate metaphor that we can use, because as we know, the part of the plant who are barely hanging in there needed to be cut so that the whole plant will be healthier.

But more than that concept, the metaphor of the vine can also be read in the lens how we are doing ministry. There are two parts that I would like to invite you to contemplate as think about today's passage. The first thing to look at is the importance of looking at the parts of the plants that are closest to the trunk/vine/main branch. As I mentioned earlier, the closer the branches are to the actual source, the healthier it is. I look at it as a reminder that when I am closer to Jesus as the main vine/plant, I can maintain my healthy spiritual health. Translating this to the theology of John Wesley (something that I have been mentioning a lot in past sermons), this is maintaining a healthy personal holiness. This means that I continue to do practices that nourishes my spiritual life – praying, reading the Scripture and other resources that allows me to connect to God and be reminded of the teachings of Jesus, listening to God's voice in my personal meditation through my art projects, or in my conversation with folks to talk about God's love. However, it does not end there. As a branch that is attached to vine, there is also a need for me to extend as part of my growth. I would eventually need to bear fruit. And I see this or translate this as my social holiness, which as I have mentioned in the past is my way of reflecting my attachment to God and Christ. This is literally how I am extending to others to continue to be a beacon of God's love for others – people and all of God's creation.

In both cases, these two situations are happening at the same time and not one after the other. As the branch, I have to be attached to the vine or the main plant so that I can get my own nourishment, while at the same time, I am extending this attachment to bear fruit. Fruits of God's love that may nourish others. And this is the nourishment that is not focused on just giving away food, although sometimes I

have the propensity for that. But this should widen to more actions, especially advocating for those who needed it, advocating for peace, justice, equity, mercy and love. My attachment to Christ is my main source of sustenance so that I can extend it to others. But in my attachment and my health as the branch, I understand there are times when parts of me that are unhealthy needed to be pruned. This, for me is transformation that can usher in redemption. It can be bad habits or behavior that impedes me from listening to God's call to ministry.

This also brings me to ponder on how our congregation can draw a message of how we are as an outpost of God's kin-dom here in Columbia Heights. There is no doubt that we are attached in the main vine – Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that God as the vinegrower plays a role in our health as a faith circle. I believe that we are strongly attached to the vine. But I would like to invite you to look deeper and examine if we are being fruitful. If we are to look at our so-called 'fruits', how are we doing? And as I analyze this, I look at the different aspects of our organization. How are our finances doing? How are our ministries in the neighborhood doing? Unfortunately, because we are not doing church in-person, there are a lot of questions about whether we are doing good or not. But I would like to urge you to broaden our line of sight to look at the periphery of the life of our congregation. Are we doing what it takes to show God's love to our own little world in Columbia Heights? A perfect example of this question is, are we doing what it takes to keep us and the people around us safe in the face of a global health emergency? Are we doing safe practices to make sure that we are embodying the sense of being a caring community, both within our faith circle and outside of it? Are we engaging in actions and conversations that reflects our healthy attachment to Christ as the main plant?

To be completely honest, there is no exact answer to the question if whether we are a fruitful congregation or not. In reality, if one person asks this to members of our congregation, for sure there will be different answers from different folks. And this is okay, because congregational health and well-being can be defined differently by various folks....adding the fact that there will always be diverse backgrounds and contexts that people will be coming from. But I think, it is safe to say that if we would like to see our congregation flourish, this means that more than being strongly attached to Christ, we also need to prune our branches to ensure our health...to maintain that we are effective and efficient in carrying out our mission....and that is to make disciples to transform our world...our broken world. And this brings me to more reflection of what are the things that is needed to prune in order for us to be healthy. And this pruning does not at all mean cutting people off, but more of finding the transformation among all of us to achieve the redemption that God offers to all of us. I believe this is the cleansing that is mentioned in verse 3, with the promise of verses 4-5. That we will flourish. This is how I think we can be true disciples that can make more disciples who will transform the world.

Let me leave you with these challenges: In what ways are we abiding in Christ? What are the fruits that we are producing? The symbol of the vine is about discipleship and being in community with each other, and the rest of God's kin-dom in the long run – what, then, needs to happen for us to produce a bountiful harvest? Is Community UMC a fruit-bearing vine or are we the vine that is at the end, and ready to be cut off? What kind of vine are we? May it be so. Amen.