

For five of the next six weeks Richard and I are going to address the five value words and five priorities for our life together as the church that our church leaders developed through a number of months of careful attention to our congregational vision process. As it turns out, we found that one of our value words corresponded naturally with our priorities and goals for church and life. Faith with Nurturing Spirituality, Courage with Developing Disciples, Love with Building Relationships, Compassion with Reaching out to Others, and Commitment with Member and Leader Development. And we think that there's an order in how these priorities and goals might come about, so we're going to address them in a sequence. We begin with faith and it's corollary, nurturing spirituality.

It has to be said that the language of "spiritual" and "spirituality" conjures up all sorts of connotations in the popular imagination. It points toward the human desire toward self-transcendence or toward something that frames life and provides meaning. For all that longing that is very much a part of what it means to be human, it might surprise you to know that "spirituality" isn't a word that comes up in the bible. And in our culture it's a concept more often associated with monastics, zen masters, and freelance religionists than it is with ordinary Christians trying to follow Jesus while keeping from being overwhelmed by the daily, stubborn realities of life.

Yet spirituality is very much at the heart of who we are as Christians. Belden Lane describes spirituality as "lived religion",<sup>1</sup> and Ronald Rolheiser writes, "Spirituality is what we do with our unrest."<sup>2</sup> It's how we channel the passion that the Holy Spirit has welled up inside of us. The earliest Christian mystics connect spirituality with desire - with the restless longing for the presence of God. The irony of spirituality is that the only desire truly able to satisfy is a desire that cannot be filled. Our deepest human longing is to linger with a mystery that we can only see dimly.

So let us read from the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel, verses one through eleven. Jesus is in the upper room with his disciples, knowing that soon he will depart from them and be led to the cross.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's

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<sup>1</sup> Belden Lane. *Landscapes of the Sacred: Geography and Narrative in American Spirituality* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002) p. 230

<sup>2</sup> Ronald Rolheiser. *The Holy Longing: The Search for a Christian Spirituality* (New York: Doubleday, 1999) p. 5

commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

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In farms out here on the East I've noticed that farmers tend to build fences around their properties to keep their livestock in and the livestock of neighboring farms out. That suits their purposes well because it's much more densely populated in this part of the country and farms tend to be bounded by some pretty firm geographic markers. But there are some pretty vast stretches of land as you head out West. My grandparents spent their summers in Montana and I was able to spend a summer with them once. Some ranches out there cover an enormous geographic area and fencing the property is out of the question. In some places the ranches are so vast that the idea of a fence seems positively ridiculous. The only real option is for the rancher to sink a bore and create a well, or if he's lucky have a stream come through his land. Under these conditions, he doesn't have to worry about fences. It is assumed that livestock, though they may be prone to wander will never roam too far from the stream or they will die. If there is water, the cattle will stick around.

I think we tend to be the same way. The Psalmist says that those who meditate upon the scripture "are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper". Whether or not you consider yourself a spiritual person, we all draw our vitality from somewhere - and when we find life, though we may stray, we'll not go too far from the source.

Christian Spirituality is rooted in Jesus, but the way that we know Jesus is rooted in the narratives of Scripture. A community with deep roots will seek to, as Eugene Peterson puts it, "pull the scriptures back from the contemporary imagination...and reestablish them at the center as the text for living the Christian life deeply and well."<sup>3</sup> An interest in spirituality without an interest in scriptures leaves us with a spirituality devoid of form or shape. The Christian community is nourished by scripture the way that the human body is nourished by food. We meditate on the scriptures, we sit with them not so that we can master a subject, but so that we can know God. We read them to be shaped by them. We read them to be connected to Jesus, the source of our life.

In this morning's scripture lesson we hear those words of Jesus which set up so many resonances that we could hear it twenty times and only begin to scratch the surface: "I am the true vine, and my father is the vinedresser. Abide in me, and I in you. If you abide in me, and my words in you, ask whatever you want. Apart from me you can do nothing."

The picture that Jesus composes is of a vine and its branches. It's a multifaceted symbol. As the vine supplies nourishment to the branches, which then produce fruit, so the love of Christ results in lived religion, religion that's more than intellectual assent to a set of abstract theological propositions - religion that gets into your bones and marrow and animates you to live differently. The vine is the source of the branches' vitality - and Jesus is telling his disciples, that he is the source of this vibrant life-giving new way of being in the world.

For the disciples this picture of the vine and branches meant so much more than it does for us. We are not always hip to biblical metaphor. The vine, like the fig tree, is one of the regular Old

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<sup>3</sup> Eugene Peterson, *Eat This Book: A Conversation on the Art of Spiritual Reading* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 2006) p. 17

Testament images of Israel, God's people. God brought a vine out of Egypt, declares the psalmist, and planted it in a good land. The prophet Isaiah wrote a song about God's vineyard. Hosea spoke of God finding Israel like grapes in the wilderness, but something always went wrong. In the Psalm, foreigners pillage God's vineyard and wild beasts uproot it. In Isaiah, the vine that should have borne good fruit bore bad fruit instead.

But here, in the midst of John's narrative, we find in Jesus the true vine, the true Israel, *the real thing*. And he is calling his followers, then and now to be joined to him and so to become grafted into God's vineyard. The result of this union will be an overflow of love, and the fulfillment of God's plan for the world. The satisfaction of the restless longing of our hearts.

The church, the people of God are called to abide - to dwell in Christ - to gather their spiritual nourishment in as intimate a relationship as that between a vine and its branches.

Yet here's the part where the transition from theory to practice gets a bit hazy. Here's the part where the world sometimes looks at the church and sees only a dressed up version of itself. We have become known for things other than the very thing that we are supposed to be known by - our love for each other, and our love for those outside. It's not the case that society has ever gotten past the claims of the gospel, it is perhaps the case that society has seldom seen the kind of spirituality that Jesus calls us to embodied in the life of the church.

So much of our cultural conditioning teaches us to invest in ourselves so that we may reach our full potential, to be more fully, more truly ourselves. And we want this for ourselves, for our own enjoyment, so that we can be fulfilled and happy in ourselves. We see that in society and are often critical of its materialistic, selfish appearance. But I have a suspicion a lot of people come to Church for the same reasons; to be uplifted, to be inspired, to gain peace of mind, to better themselves.

But we are told here, in the starkest terms, that true spirituality is not like that. Spirituality is not like a lake that gathers more and more water and keeps it for itself, but is the kind of lake that is constantly replenished by fresh waters coming down from the hills, constantly giving out in turn to rivers and streams that flow into the valley. In Jesus' words we are called to be fruit-bearing branches on the vine and if the world finds Christianity puzzling as it looks in from the outside, or if we find it unsatisfactory as we sit here on the inside, perhaps the reason is because we have forgotten that bearing fruit, living for God in the power of the risen Christ isn't an optional extra tacked on to the periphery of our faith; it is the very center of our faith. If we do not bear fruit, we wither and die. We can only discover the completeness of joy when we submit ourselves to the vinedresser.

If we are connected to Jesus, he tells us that we will bear fruit. If you bear fruit there is a whole life of surprises ahead of you. Every branch that bears fruit, Jesus says, the father prunes in order to make it bear more fruit. In contrast to what we might expect, the spirituality which we are offered in Christ is not one in which we have access to unfettered personal development - it is one in which we are called to submit ourselves to the pruning knife.

The genius of the scriptures is that they show how the life of the spirit - the life of faith in Jesus Christ includes a radically transformed life now, with power given through the Holy Spirit right this minute. Christian faith is more than belief. Christian spirituality doesn't mean just anything. Our spirituality is a way of life. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whom many of you just spent forty days in

conversation with and about, endured two years of imprisonment by the Nazis before he was hanged. He was a great exemplar in our own time of this all-encompassing faith. Bonhoeffer wrote: “Faith means the finding and holding fast of this foundation [the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ]. It means casting anchor upon it and being held fast by it. Faith means founding my life upon a foundation which is outside myself, upon an eternal and Holy foundation, Jesus Christ”.<sup>4</sup> Faith is a way of life. More important it is *the Jesus way of life*.

Sometimes, Jesus makes hints, suggestions. Here the case is different – here he commands; Jesus says to us, and the repetition in the verses are intentional; “abide in me, and I in you; you can’t bear fruit unless you abide in me; those who abide in me bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing; anyone who doesn’t abide in me is cast off like a branch and withers...” The only way that we can bear witness to the world is if we ourselves are a community that is spiritually nourished – by being involved in the communal life of worship, and prayer, and meditation.

But the point of all this is not simply to store up our spiritual reservoir for a time of dryness. We are only the church when we offer ourselves to those around us. If we abide in Christ, we will find joy where we once only found burden.

If we are ready to have our faith, our own spiritual and worldly aspirations transformed by Jesus’ questions to us; his searching, his offer of a new life as a cleansed, pruned, fruit-bearing branch on the vine – we may just become the type of loving community that we are called to be and that the world desperately wants us to be.

We may be put off by the apparent re-shaping of priorities that this calls for. But Jesus leaves us with hope; “I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.” While life on the vine may be other than what we were expecting, it may just be the very thing we have been searching for all along.

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<sup>4</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, cited in Fleming Rutledge. *The Bible and the New York Times* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1999) pp. 158-159