

Today we begin a new series called “Life on the Vine”.

In John 15 we heard about how Jesus says he is the vine and we are the branches. If we remain in him, the Holy Spirit will grow in us fruit. Fruit that will last.

This fruit of the Spirit is this (Gal 5)

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

If we remain in Christ, following the voice of the one who offers this fruit, we will bear much fruit. This fruit are God’s character, and so we will show the world God if we do this.

We also hear that God is the vine grower, the one who tends and nurtures and prunes the vine.

“He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (John 15: 2-3).

Many of you know about pruning. How it can be a brutal process, cutting back big branches, the ones that are old, seemingly hacking away most of a tree or vine.

This process is necessary though, so that as John says: the branches that are bearing fruit can bear more fruit.

It seems that sometimes because of God’s grace, we find ourselves at times being pruned, or redirected, or going without.

I don’t always know what this looks like, but there can be many obstacles to bearing fruit. Maybe they are our desires, directed toward the wrong thing; or our self-interest which hopes for all of our stuff; or the things we’re told are important in our communities; many things.

And so we learn to trust the Vine Grower and the Spirit to grow in us the fruit necessary.

And we learn to remain in Christ, paying attention to what nurtures and bears fruit in us and in our communities over the long haul. Lean on others on the vine to show us the way. And trust the Spirit for what we cannot do ourselves.

This is called discipleship.

What fruit are you noticing blossoming and growing in your right now, under the stress of pandemic? What are you noticing might need to be pruned away?

And this is what we want to spend some time reflecting on.

Because:

this fruit is given to us to mend the breaking and tearing in communities and lives.

this fruit is given to us to show God's love for the world.

this fruit is given to us to be light in the darkness that the darkness cannot overcome.

this fruit is given to us to grow us into the people with the character of God.

This fruit is a gift for us and for our world. And so we remain in the vine, nurturing that which produces fruit, and following the One who offers it to us.

Today we're exploring love in an age when self-interest and economic exchanged is prized in our world.

There are many characteristics that make up God's love, but

“The defining feature of God's love is its “other-directedness. When we are called to imitate the love of God, we are being called out of ourselves, called to live a life of unconditional concern for the well-being of others.”

Love moves us outside ourselves, does not seek our own interest, is patient, perseverant, is willing to go the distance, to look out for other's needs, to suffer with those who suffer, and to love without needing love returned. Love opens our lives up to the possibility of welcoming another.

Jesus tells us over and over again: “This is my commandments, that you love one another as I have loved you.” (John 15: 12)

1 John 4:12, 8¹² No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us.12); whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. (8)

These are hard words. They make us reflect on ourselves. Are we loving our brothers and sisters? If we lived in a world where the title “Christian” had to be given to you by others, would they be able to recognize you as such because of your love? Is God made known through us because we are loving? Do we know God?

These questions aren't meant to bring up shame or guilt, but to ask us to reflect honestly about the ways we've fallen short of love, and to celebrate the places where love is truly growing.

All this means, we take the "risky step and attempt to embody this mark of God's character in this time and place." (P. Kenneson) To *live* God's love.

The thing is, "[Much of our everyday life is shaped by economic practices. Buying and selling goods and services are woven into our daily lives]...we live and move and have our being within an economic system that impacts nearly every aspect of our lives. The obvious strength of this system is its ability to deliver a tremendous variety of goods and services to vast numbers of people in a relatively cost-effective way. The advantages of such division of labor are obvious to anyone who has considered how different our lives would be if we had to grow our own food, sew our own clothes and build our own homes." (468)

"Even though the market system could be viewed as a mechanism for rendering mutual service, little in our society encourages us to do so. Instead, we are encouraged to operate in the market place as self-interested parties attempting to secure our own existence in the midst of others doing the same. As a result, we tend to view other people in the marketplace not as unique and splendid people in their own right who warrant our attention, but as actors in our drama. Can we really be other-directed when so many of our daily interactions encourage us to be self-interested, to pay attention to others only to the extent that they can benefit us?" (473)

Economic exchange and self-interest finds its way into our relationships, community, and ideas of love.

Philip Kenneson, the author of the book, argues that there are a few ways we see this in our daily lives.

The first is this: That we, on purpose or by accident, put a price on everything and everyone

1. We often see our skills and talents, maybe even our bodies as something to be sold or bought, rather than given for the sake of the world.

- a. Of course, it's good to get paid for what we do, but this idea that we apply our skills to the thing that will pay most, or we are willing to sell our ideas, our talent
 - b. Love offers us another way
 - i. To give of ourselves and our skills for the sake of others (hair dressers in Mustard Seed), giving what you are good at to the church, to the community around us. We see this here at Woody Nook often.
2. There can be a tendency to exclude or downplay certain groups from society because they do not “produce”
- a. Jean Vanier, who was found to have mistreated women—which we grieve and denounce as wrong, but who started a home for those who are differently abled, showed us that often times we do not have space in community for those who are not like us because they do not produce in the same ways.
 - b. We see it in the way people talk about those who are experiencing poverty or homelessness are talked about as lazy, saying things that imply they are lazy or milking the system.
 - c. But love offers us a way of being differently: of seeing everyone as someone who we can love.
 - i. Offers us a way to.....notice, see the worth of a person in their being alive. Seeing their complexity. Working to open circles to include rather than exclude. And loving with patience, perseverance and a true willingness to receive the person before you.
3. We sometimes assume that what we are paid is what we are worth.
- a. See this around us in the way society often values and honors the person who is a doctor or lawyer more than someone who makes our shoes or picks our fruit. And the way we allow our financial situation to define people's places in the world, and who gets to make decisions in our organizations and politics.
 - b. love offers us a way: of seeing every single human as image bearers of God.
 - i. It allows us to consider those who are invisible to us or considered “less worthy” of our time and attention. Paying attention to them might cause us to ask: Can the fruit picker feed her family? Can the shoemaker put shoes on her daughter's feet? Can the single mother across the road afford

housing? And this love might cause us to seek new policies for our neighbors.

4. We also sometimes get caught in the idea that we are what we have, what we consume, the skills we have—both people and things. There’s a real sense that we need to protect that at all costs and make sure it always serves our self-interest. .
 - a. We see this in advertisements that try to sell us designer items and phones to show us who we could be rather than who we are. See it in the way we protect our stuff or our investments or our people.
 - a. But love offers us a different way: the way of generosity and stewardship:
 - i. “The question we must ask ourselves repeatedly is not, “Since God has given me these resources, how do I protect them?” but “Since God has entrusted these resources to me to do with them what Jesus would do if he were here, what does acting in such a way require in this specific situation”? “what if God has entrusted to some of us much more than we need, not as a “blessing” to be hoarded, but as a call to reach out to those in need that they might be provided for by the One who loves them most?? (603)”
 - ii. We see this in our community often—generosity at the beginning of COVID.

The second place we see it is in the way we have relationship contracts.

1. The way we understand relationships as contracts.
 - a. See this around us in the idea that is all over right now that we must: cut out all the people who sap you of energy in your life. Or if things in this relationship cost too much, get too hard, or I wasn’t happy anymore that we can do what we want and get rid of them.
 - b. This comes out too in the way we see people often as objects to meet our needs: our happiness, our desires, our goals and ideals—forgetting that the person behind the till or cutting your hair is human.
 - c. And love offers us a way of being differently –love is a healing balm...relationships as covenants, patterned after God’s love for us. Given freely, perseverant and patient, following through on your promises even when others don’t, seeing people as not what they can contribute to our lives, but how we can share life and love with them. (Matthew 5). Of course, we need good boundaries, but

what if we asked ourselves the question: what boundaries do I need so that this person can remain in my life?

2. Relational contracts also come out when we look at the way division is celebrated right now.
 - a. We see this in the way division in the world right now is celebrated as a way to protect what we have—a gender, a religion, a political opinion, my rights, my people. Or as some say “my tribe”. It is a way to make sure that we divide, conquer and win at all cost—even at the cost of exclusion, hatred, injustice, or killing those we disagree with.
 - b. We might see this in the way we avoid compromise of any of those rights, ideas, opinions, actions, we avoid making tiny deaths to our own self-interest so we can move forward together.
 - c. And love offers us a way of being differently—love is a healing balm.
 - i. Offering us a picture of what it means to lay down our own self-interest, to serve one another, to find a way forward together not leaving the others behind. Offering love, even to our enemies. (Matt 5)

Our market exchange and self-interest sometimes even seeps into the way we see God, faith and church.

1. God sometimes is understood by accident as the “everlasting genie” or “santa”—someone who gives us all our wishes and desires, who repays good when we are good. And when we pray, when we are good, when we ask and it is not given to us, or when something bad happens to us, we blame God and many even give up faith.
 - a. Love offers us a different way: to see God as the one who walks with us in suffering, helps us live through it and blesses us, anchors and steadies us, transforms us.
2. We sometimes get caught in the idea that church or faith should serve us: what’s in it more me? we call it “church shopping” when we go to find a church that will fulfill my need, give us the programs we want, or the Christian opinions we find tasty.
 - a. But Love offers us a different way: the hard work of discipleship, of meeting us with gifts we didn’t think we needed, a community to grow and be encouraged in and with.
3. We also sometimes define our Christianity by what we buy, support or consume. For instance: if we buy this Christian shirt, consume this

Christian music, give money to this Christian organization, speak that Christian lingo that we are a Christian.

a. Love offers us a different way: that we will be known by our fruit.

1 John 4:18 says this: There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear, for fear has to do with punishments, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”

And we can see, the kind of love we are called to practice and live, does drive out fear.

Love drives out the fear of where our worth has to come from; of not having enough.

Love drives out the fear of my rights transplanted because of yours; of being cut out of people’s lives.

Love drives out the fear of needless competition; to protect me and myself at all costs.

Love drives out the fear of having to be awesome enough to get love and belonging; of your enemies, even. Possibly.

Both in ourselves as we experience love.

And in those who we give love to.

Love is a healing balm for our world. and through it the world comes to know God and God’s love through you.

Spend some time reflecting this week: how might these economic exchanges and self-interest be showing up in our relationships and communities? How might we be called to lay them down and pick up the habit of Christ’s kind of love in our world?
