

**GROWING TOGETHER IN GOD'S GARDEN**

**John 15:1-13**

**Sermon preached by Dr. Cahill**

**Babcock Presbyterian Church**

**Sunday, April 20, 2008**

It was a warm sunny day. My mother and father were going back and forth to a local nursery buying flats of ivy to plant around the house. At one point my father complained to my mother how much all this ivy was costing. My older brother overheard their conversation. Without a word he jumped on his bike and rode off. About an hour later he returned with the basket on his handlebars filled with green vines. "Mom, Dad," he cried out, "look what I found growing in the woods. Tons of ivy. And it's free!" Unfortunately for John it was poison ivy.

When Jesus proclaimed, "I am the true vine..." he implied there are false vines out there, and it's so easy to get all entangled up in these false vines that always lead to frustration and heartache. But when you choose the true vine you become part of a living, growing organism.

And that is what a Christian community is, a living, growing organism. Jesus would always use parables from nature to illustrate the nature of the God's Kingdom. "The Kingdom of heaven is like a

mustard seed, the tiniest of seeds. But when it is planted it grows into a great tree providing shelter for birds of the air." "See the lilies of the field, how they grow..."

Both of these examples of Jesus' teaching highlight the growing and the living you experience when you intentionally seek out the presence of God.

"I am the real vine...you are the branches. Whoever remains united in me and I in him will bear much fruit, for you can do nothing without me."

The only way you grow into your humanity is to answer Jesus' call to become Christ-like.

Let's take a minute to understand what it means to be "Christ-like" because for some that phrase, "you must become like Christ" is unnerving because it's interpreted to mean you must become perfect in every way, an impossible challenge to live up to. So what does "being Christ-like" really mean?

When you look at Jesus' life you see very quickly Jesus was forever seeking out God's presence.

Before he died Beatle George Harrison said in an interview, "Everything else in life can wait, except your search for God." Harrison knew the secret. Without an intimate relationship with God, life is empty and without purpose. That's why we need to

seek out God for friendship.

I'll say it again, "Christianity is primarily about the quality of your relationships, first with God, then your neighbor and last but not least yourself." These relationships need to be in harmony with each other because only then can you fulfill Christ's great commandment: "This is my command that you love one another as I have loved you."

You already know the only way you can keep that commandment is to forge a healthy relationship with God. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength." To love God takes a decision to trust God because on your own you can't do it. You need help. That's why Jesus said, "If you remain united with me, and my words remain united with you, ask for whatever and you will have it." That doesn't mean, "God I want a million bucks in tens and twenties." If you are a branch on Jesus' vine, you know better than that. But if you are on that spiritual journey with Jesus, you will ask for and receive those eternal graces of the Kingdom, like faith, hope and most especially love. That enables you to grow.

Of course with real growth there are growing pains. "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."

Have you ever pruned a tree or a bush? You see dead branches, or branches that don't have fruit or leaves. These branches keep the tree from growing, because they drain away vital nutrients from the rest of the tree. So what do you do? You cut them off. With your help your tree grows.

When you are in Christ you can let God prune from your life anything that saps you of spiritual energy. As God grows you with the increasing desire to love him there is less room for worry, jealousy, greed or lust, leaving more room for God. It just happens as you experience the way God sneaks up and surprises you. Again, it doesn't mean that you are perfect. It simply means you know how important it is to search for God. It's your primary responsibility.

What are some of the ways you search for God? Certainly prayer and Bible study. Also being a servant, being there for people in need. Loving them, helping them, pointing them to Christ. Or as Jesus put it, "No one has greater love than this, to lay down your life for your friends." That doesn't mean being a

human sacrifice; it does mean being a LIVING sacrifice. Being ready to give your precious self away for your neighbor in need.

You may ask, "Well, how do I get to the point that I'm really willing to be that Christ-like, living sacrifice? You can only become a Christian and grow as a Christian in community. That's why today's sermon title is "Growing Together In God's Garden." Very few of us grow in Christ all by ourselves. We need to be in Christian fellowship with each other. And by fellowship I mean developing deep spiritual friendships with other believers, being able and willing to take off your public mask with trusted Christian friends, and make yourself vulnerable, letting others help you carry your burdens so you can grow in Christ. You see we not only must belong to Christ, we must belong to each other. Then we can grow together in God's garden.

Now so far everything I've said might sound to you like theory. "It sounds good, but how can I practically apply these theories and make them happen in my daily life, especially when I have no real motivation to change. I know I'm not perfect, there are things about me that need changing, but all this Christian stuff you talk about is so

overwhelming, I don't know where to begin.”

Fair enough, you don't know how to start. So here are a few suggestions.

First, pray about it. Open negotiations with God for your unconditional surrender. Ask for help, insights and the desire to be changed. Also, prayerfully take a bold moral inventory of your life.

Honestly name those things that need to change and ask the Holy Spirit to plant the seeds that will grow, if you let them. Then wait for God to show you how to let these seeds, already planted deep inside you to grow.

Second. Be ready for God to give you opportunities to change your attitudes that will change your behaviors. And keep in mind these changes can happen in small ways.

For instance, if you have relationship problems with a neighbor, a family member or a coworker that you've discerned might be overcome if you change your attitudes and behaviors, take the first baby step in the healing process God has already begun.

I was meeting regularly with a young husband and father for spiritual mentoring with the aim of helping him become more human, or Christ-like. One day we talked about the everyday stresses of

balancing his home life and career and how Christ could be found emerging from the stress.

The next week he told me he came home from work, tired and wanting to relax only to find dishes in the sink and the house a mess. His wife, a stay at home Mom, was out in the back yard with their two year old son. He said, "My first impulse was to get angry. She's home all day why can't she clean the house so I don't have to come home to this mess." Then I heard a voice in my head saying, "Clean the dishes yourself." I then realized my wife must have had a long day too, so I cleaned the dishes. The anger I was feeling was replaced with a deeper appreciation for my son's mother, and when she and the baby finally came back in the house she hugged me and said, "Thank you for being such a good husband."

The lesson we can learn from this true story: If you let God change you, you will grow. If you intentionally seek out Christ and invite him to prune your dead branches, your dead attitudes and behaviors, you will bear much fruit. And finally, if you seek out Christian friendships within the beloved community, we will grow.

Christian Schwartz, a Christian author, wrote,

“If Jesus were walking among us today he would hardly replace his parables from nature with, ‘The Kingdom of God is like a computer program—your output depends on your input.’ Technocratic illustrations like this would miss the secret of life.”

God sent his only Son to love the world and reveal the hidden secrets of eternity that empower us to grow together in God’s garden.