

Ottawa Mennonite Church
Sermon: People of the Vine
October 5, 2008
Scripture: Matthew 21:33-46



I spoke on this phone this week with my parents, and while the conversation went in predictable patterns one topic was raised which we only talk about once a year, my grandparents vineyard. Late September and early October are typically the time when one sees great and unusual machinery driving down the country roads on their way from vineyard to vineyard harvesting the grapes and transporting them to the various wineries around the Niagara Region.

While growing up, I spent many of my summers on my grandparents farm. They lived about 10 minutes away from where my parents worked. So, for my parents they were convenient babysitters, and for us it was an opportunity to get to know our grandparents better and in hindsight to connect with the land and our heritage.

My grandparents owned, and still do to this day, a modest 10 acre vineyard in the midst of the Niagara Region green belt. Between the ground chemistry and the unique weather conditions afforded by the combination of Lake Ontario and the Niagara Escarpment, the Niagara Region has itself become one of the hotspots for wine production in Canada. It was never about the wine, it was about the fruit, the plants, the land and the fellowship.

I have many memories of spending time with my grandparents out in the vineyard. Mornings were spent with our hands in the dirt pulling weeds out, getting the soil under our nails and the dew on our faces. Afternoons were in amongst the more mature grapes, picking up stones, tying vines to wires, pruning away leaves, or unnecessary sprouts.

Whether it is riding on a motorcycle with Grandpa to the back of the vineyard in between the grape rows, dodging errant vines waiting in the wings to slap you unceremoniously in the face as you fly by or moving at a snail's pace from plant to plant as weeding, suckering, or pruning grapes. Time on the farm moved differently. Extracted from the world, it seemed to be a place where time moved independent of the rest of the world.

It has been years since I walked that farm, felt the vines as I moved amongst them, watched the grapes grow from small green beads to large juicy purple globes. It has been a long time since my hands have

been in the dirt, since I smelled the familiar smells, tasted the grapes freshly picked from the bunches, walked across the rickety bridge. But my grandparents vineyard still holds a special place in my heart.

Vineyards have a special atmosphere about them, they have a presence which other farms lack. They are romanticised in books and film, and through other media. One doesn't hear the same romanticized story of peach orchards, or strawberry patches, kiwi trees, or even apple orchards in the same way that once a vineyard is added to a story the location cannot help but dominate. N.T. Wright in a sermon delivered in April of 2001 writes:

“the very word 'vineyard' has a romantic glow. It breathes the air of mildly exotic holidays, of sunny evenings sampling the local produce, of an apparently leisured and gracious way of life. ... It all seems a long way from the hard business of agriculture in our own country.”¹

Perhaps it is the near parallel placement of the rows which mesmerize the eye, or maybe it is the intimacy which a grape vine demands. One does not typically use large boorish implements to trim the vines, no, attention must be given to each plant individually. Weeds must be removed by hand so as to not damage the fragile root system, young sprouts must gently be picked off to allow nutrients to spread to already established branches. Leaves must be pruned so that sufficient light will reach the plants, and extraneous bunches of grapes must be sacrificed so that the plant will not over exert itself. Perhaps it is the fragility of an individual grape that causes us to nurture suchs fruits.

Biblical Vines

But of course in Israel, in the days of Isaiah and of Jesus, and today, vineyards are simply working farms where people are gaining a living from the soil. Everybody likes the result; but the farmers are under no illusions about how much effort it takes to get it right, or how easy it is to get it wrong. And, like every other aspect of land, vineyards in the Bible quickly and easily got muddled up with power and prestige.²

The word vineyard appears at least 75 times between the old and new testament, its first mention is soon after the flood, Noah plants a vineyard and the grapes from it make an, apparently a very potent wine. Vineyards, grapes and wine make appearances all throughout the old testament. There are laws

¹ <http://www.westminster-abbey.org/worship/sermons/13813>

² Ibid.

regarding them in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In the Gospels there are the parables of the Laborers and the Parable of the wicked tenants . Grapes appear 35 times, mostly in the old testament, and vines appear 50 times, one of the better known vine passages is found in John 15, "I am the vine and you are the branches" All in all the image of the grape, vine and vineyard is a significant thread thought the Bible.

Now the questions I often ask myself and encourage others to consider when reading a parables such as this is: who are we in this story, and where do you place yourself? Most of us do not want to be the vengeful and wicked tenants, most of us want to be those sent in afterwards to gently and carefully tend the vines, to deliver the produce at the appointed time, when it is ripe and ready for harvest. As nice as it would be to be the absentee land owner (let's face it, you get the the benefit of the crop without the hard labour? Nice deal), it is not a role that is available for us. And I don't think many of us here would be too willing to be the servants or the son. So that leaves us with the question, are you a tenant or are you a responsible farmer? Are you a tenant who wants the crop for yourself, you did after all earn it, you did the heavy labour, and you did harvest it, but then again, you also have a contract with your landlord to hand over the crop come harvest time. Or the responsible farmer, who honors their contract, who does the work, and willingly delivers the crop on time.

Fruit of the Vine

Whether you choose to be a tenant or a person of the vine, your are working the vineyard. The question I propose is this, as workers of God's vineyard, are you producing fruit? I think that here we can talk about fruit in two dimensions.

In one sense, followers of Christ are fruit. This sounds very much like a mission oriented question. The evangelical query might be "Are you doing all that you can to bring new followers to Christ?, To grow fruit for God's kingdom." As a gathered community it is important that all of us work together to grow fruit. What, or who, are the fruit which we are growing? obviously children, but also newcomers, refugees, friends, family. The gathered community are all fruit of God's vineyard, so the question is how are you tending to the vineyard? How are you tending to the various members of God's gathered community? We pray for each other in worship, and presumeably during the week, we offer our time, through the various ministries of the church. Are we are a welcoming community. I leave this question with you, how are other ways that you could tend to God's vineyard.

The other use of fruit which we could consider are the fruits of the spirit; **love** both your neighbour and your enemies, **joy** in both the big things and in the little things, **peace**, globally and locally, and in every dimension you can imagine, **patience** especially when in times where you are running low. , **kindness**, both to those who are friendly and to those who might be a little...crusty. **generosity** in not just money but in time too,, **faithfulness**, to both God, Christ, the church and to the various relationships in your life. ²³ **gentleness**, in how we interact with each other and everyone around us, and **self-control** to avoid temptation, but also to keep your self disciplined.³

Over the past couple of weeks and for the next couple of months the Youth and I will be exploring a variety of spiritual disciplines. Spiritual disciplines such as various forms prayer, sabbath, pilgrimage, service, hospitality, study , and silence are some practices that others have found particularly fruitful in their own spiritual lives. It is through the regular practice and exploration of such disciplines that I hope will bear spiritual fruit in the lives of the youth. How is it that you might do the same? What are some spiritual practices that you do to bear fruit?

As a gathered community it is up to each of us to tend to each other so that we may bear fruit. Like grape vines, we need to be pruned of life stealing sprouts, the weeds need to be pulled, we need to be tended. We need to have our errant vines guided back to the wire so that we can grasp it and grow tall and strong. We need to be fertilized, and watered. We need to do this for each other and allow it to be done to ourselves.

So are you willing to be a person of the vine. Are you willing to be a vine in God's vineyard? Doing so means we need to allow ourselves to be vulnerable so that we can be taken care of, , but we also need to tend to others so that they can bear spiritual fruit too. *Are you willing to give up and tend to each other so that they may bear spiritual fruit, and are you willing to be vulnerable so that you can be tended to, so that you yourself can bear spiritual fruit? Each of us are both vines and farmers, and God charges us with the care of the vineyard and the responsibility of bearing fruit. Are you willing to be people of the vine?

³ Galatians 5:22-23

~Craig Neufeld