

John 15:1-6, 16-17
Appointed to Bear Fruit
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9-17-17

I want to begin by showing you a picture. This is Lake Itasca State Park in Park Rapids Minnesota. Does anyone know what originates in the waters of Lake Itasca?

From this very average looking lake springs one of the greatest most influential bodies of water in the entire world. One of the top five longest rivers. A river that has taken on almost mythological characteristics in the writings of people like Mark Twain, William Faulkner, and Toni Morrison.

I show this to you because it serves as a helpful metaphor as we begin a new series of messages this fall. Throughout these next few months we are going to examine precious scriptural and theological gems of our Protestant and Reformed Christian Faith.

I've entitled this series *And Always Being Reformed...by Jesus*. As this is our calling as men and women invited by God into a living relationship with Jesus. The book of 1 Peter says: **you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation...Once we were not a people, but now we are the people of God.** And as the people of God, we recognize that like the Mississippi River that stream is never stagnant, we are always being formed and shaped in the image of our leader Jesus as we journey with him.

The phrase “and always being reformed” is one that was coined by early Christian leaders, and used during a period of great change known as the reformation. Its Latin is *Ecclesia reformanta, semper reformanda* (the Church is reformed or reforming and always being reformed.)

And we're going to look closely at the Scriptures that caused men and women to act in heroically to reshape the Church in obedience to these texts and the God who inspired them.

We have entered a long stream of faithful men and women who have preserved and passed along this Christian Faith. Do you ever think about not only what brought you to this place, but how this story that is as old as 6,000 years still get's talked about, studied, interpreted by more than a billion people worldwide, even today? When we say the Apostles' Creed together we are reciting words that have been cherished and embraced by faithful followers of Christ for over 1700 years.

Seems that God makes a habit of using very average vessels for transformative purposes.

October 31st marks the 500th Anniversary of the beginning of the Protestant Reformation. A man named Martin Luther, a humble monk from Germany, saw the church he was a part had lost its way. It was immersed in its own voracious acquisition and consumption. The Christ we read about in the scriptures had been covered by layers and layers of misguided tradition and baseless superstition. It had lost touch with its first love and needed someone to call it back to its created purpose. So, this unassuming Monk who saw in Scripture the God who was not disappointed by our feeble efforts, but the one who was ready and willing to offer free grace to his beloved. Luther began this process of Reforming the Church, and it all started with a fairly innocuous act of posting a comment on the church door in Wittenberg—the community corkboard of his day. But the world around him was a

tinder box that simply needed the spark, and Luther's 95 Theses was just such a spark. What followed was one of the most important religious, cultural, political, and social events in all of human history.

This morning we are going to look at the core teaching of the Protestant Church known as election. Each of us is chosen in Christ, elect in him who is eternally appointed to be head of the body. We do not choose Him, our fallen nature indicates that we are incapable of such a choice. But in God's divine mercy he chooses to be for us through Jesus, the vine.

In John's gospel Jesus tells a story to illustrate this decision. As branches we receive our life, our identity, our purpose, our very essence, from the vine. It is our source of our DNA, and our capacity for live and flourishing comes only from our proximity to the vine. It is out of the vine that our life springs, and without the vine the branch cannot exist. In Acts 17, as the Apostle Paul stood before the Areopagus, addressing the men of Athens who spent their lives pondering the meaning of existence, said to them:

Men of Athens we do not worship an unknown God. The God who made the world and everything in it, being Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in temples made by man, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mankind life and breath and everything. And he made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth... he is actually not far from each one of us, for "In him we live and move and have our being"; as even some of your own poets have said, "For we are indeed his offspring."

As branches, being connected to the vine is the most natural place in the world for a branch to be. Branches don't sprout on their own. Branches don't sprout and then leave the nest to go discover themselves. Branches don't go off to college three states away because the vine was helicoptering a little too much and the branch just needs space to figure out what his or her branchiness is going to be. Branches are made to be connected with the vine, they are incapable of life without it. It's what we talked about last week when we said worship is our souls finding their purpose and place in God.

In the 1500s, in many ways the church had become disconnected from the vine. And as a result, the fruit that it was bearing was sour and bitter, it was not good and nourishing. The Church had weighed its people down with burdens that they were incapable of bearing, using salvation as leverage. If we can control people's perception of salvation, we can control their lives. In other words, if we can be the vine and they will be our branches.

And it was into notoriously unbiblical notions like this that reformers like Luther and Calvin and others sunk their theological teeth.

There's a story of Martin Luther in his quarters in the monastery raging at the notion that he was unable to know for certain whether the sum of his deeds were good enough to merit God's favor. Then the eyes of his heart fell upon Ephesians 2:8, that read **For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God,**

What Scripture lays out from word go is that God in His sovereignty was not lacking in anything, and yet in his Love created humans to live in fellowship with him. And it's all good for about three chapters. Then things go south. God's love is at its core free love, we have the freedom to accept or

reject. And since the garden we have demonstrated we are incapable of turning to God out of our own volition. We cannot bear good fruit apart from the vine.

But what passages like Ephesians 2 and John 15 demonstrate is that in spite of our desire to go it alone, God chooses us, God pursues us, God has—time and again—sought to re-graft his branches back into the vine. And the way he does that is by choosing Jesus to be the conduit through whom you and I might be rejoined to God.

You who receive Christ Jesus and believe in Him do so not by your own will or wisdom, but because His glory compels us irresistibly to turn toward Him. By His invitation, Jesus enlightens our minds, softens our hearts, and renews our wills, restoring the freedom that we lost in the fall.

But there is an important turn in the plot we must understand if we are going to grasp the full weight of this text. In verse 5 Jesus continues, **whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.** The branch exists on the vine for one important purpose, to bear fruit. Branches don't exist to point to the virtue and value of their branchiness. Branches bear fruit, it's why they're there.

The Dutch Calvinist Scholar and former President of Fuller Theological Seminary, Richard Mouw, gives this anecdote. Suppose a person is elected to be president of the United States and spends the first year of his presidency talking a lot about the fact that he has been elected. In his talks to the nation, he tells us how thrilled he is that he—of all the people who might have been chosen for the job—was elected to the office of president. He commissions studies to find out exactly how he got elected. He regularly thanks those citizens who cast their votes for him. He also talks much about his predecessors—people before him who had been elected to the presidency—and tells us how privileged he considers himself to be counted in the company of such a distinguished group of elected officials.

And just so you don't think this is a commentary on our current president, this story came from a book called Calvinism in the Las Vegas Airport written in 2004.

Surely there would come a point where we would all urge him to think about an important question he seems to be ignoring: What were you elected for? What did we elect you to do?

What Luther discovered in that cell in Wittenberg is that the only way to get right with God is to receive that sovereign grace offered to us all in Jesus Christ. But the next important question is what happens after we are made right with God?

Verse 16 Jesus puts it poignantly: **You did not choose me, I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that you fruit should abide.**

You have been given an inestimably valuable gift, peace with God through Jesus Christ. It is free, it is yours to be received. But along with that gift comes a responsibility, and that is to live as if that gift were really true. How do we live a life of winsome and compelling faith? By remembering that fruit-bearing involves two things: outward mission and upward prayer.

Upward Prayer:

You did not choose me. Oh no, it was I who chose you and appointed you... Make no mistake incredible gift of peace with God you have today has nothing to do with what a great guy or gal you are. Every day, we wake to the reality that every second of life, every beholding of the beauty around us, every laugh, every tear, every embrace, every moment of peace in the presence of the Holy Spirit is grace upon grace upon grace, poured out upon our lives by Jesus Christ. And that should cause us to look to him in grateful praise and express our gratitude through speaking to him in prayer each day.

Outward Mission:

And secondly it is an outward mission. The New Testament describes election in two phases: first God chooses you, then immediately he sends you. Jesus doesn't set his people aside for safe-keeping, like they're his collectables on a shelf. No, he brings you in and then sends you right back out there again. You're a branch, great! I'm the vine, and I say get out there and make something good. Go share my love, baptize, teach, evangelize, give 'em good news. In time when it seems as though all we have is bad news be my good news givers!

Of course, there's a warning that goes along with those who do not abide. Who are just content to be branches, just content to sit back and enjoy their branchiness. It is a warning for us, those of us who have heard the news of Jesus, and continue to try and create our own life of value in ourselves.

When we are not nourished and given our purpose by the vine we will scurry about trying to create lives of meaning and value. We will do all sorts of things that feel meaningful, like make lots of money, or get all sorts of accomplishments or accolades, or create a life of leisure, and think this is what I was made for. When in reality what we are only doing is wandering further and further from God.

Max Lucado tells the story of Punchinello the Wemmick. Punchinello lived in Wemmicksville. Just like other Wemmicks, he was made of wood. Just like the other Wemmicks, he was carved by Eli, the Wemmick-maker. And just like the other Wemmicks, he sometimes did silly things. Like the time he began collecting boxes and balls.

It began with his friend Tuck, who came home with a fancy new box, and said what a good Wemmick I am. Punchinello thought, I don't have a new box, I must not be a good Wemmick, I'll sell my books to get a box. Soon everyone was falling all over themselves, competing to see who could amass the most boxes and balls. And who could climb higher and higher. And as they are making their way to the top of the hill to be the one, not only with the most, but the one who was highest, Punchinello stumbled into Eli's workshop. He couldn't see around all of his boxes.

Is this what makes you happy? I think so? Really? Where is your house, where are your books, where are your friends? All gone. Punchinello you are special not because of the boxes and balls you have, but because I created you. What makes Wemmicks special are the gifts I give them, they are as sweet as fruit. They are things like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gratefulness, gentleness, and self-control.

Punchinello, these are the gifts I give to you when you live near me, when you spend time with me, when you find your purpose and meaning in me. **I am the vine; you are the branch. When you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.**