Felt Need

We often feel so imperfect, so powerless to change our ways. How do we draw on the perfect power of God’s perfect love that enables us to be all that God created us to be?

Key Idea

We were created by God for the sake of flourishing, of fully developing all our powers (intellectual, emotional, physical), of becoming a whole, complete human being made in the image of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the perfect power of God’s perfect love that enables us to be all God created us to be.

Key Verse

“My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.”

— John 15:8 (CEB)

Suggested Scripture for Worship


Supporting Readings

Chapter 1 of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection Theologically Considered by Marjorie Hewitt Suchocki pp.105-114.

Section VI of A Plain Account of Christian Perfection by John Wesley pp. 61-72.

1 Excerpt from a sermon by Dennis Davidson, How to Dwell in Jesus’ Love, 11/2/2009

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ILLUSTRATION

Orchard Experts Wound Fruit Trees To Bear More Fruit

“In verse 8 Jesus teaches us that the proof of discipleship is spiritual fruitfulness (Mt. 7:20). ‘My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples.’

The branch produces what the life coursing through its limbs empowers, which is the ‘fruit of the vine.’ But it is not a mechanical production of fruit. The disciple connects into a relationship of love with both Jesus (v.9) and the Father (v. 10), out of which a transformed life, a fruit-bearing life, will flow. And God will be glorified by believer, by the fruit of believers, who are abiding in Christ and in His words.

The fruit the Father is looking for is spiritual. The Lord Jesus is looking for more than the ‘leaves’ of mere words professed by His followers. He wants them to mature in Him and bear spiritual fruit. Thus the Father, like a good farmer, will do what is necessary to make us fruitful.

Orchard experts say that occasionally a fruit tree will give all its energy to growing wood and leaves but little or no energy to bearing fruit. To correct this condition, the farmer takes an ax and makes a deep wound in its trunk close to the ground. That severe procedure almost always produces a change. The next year the tree gives an excellent yield. It could be called ‘the fruit of suffering.’

Oftentimes God uses a trial as an axe, or suffering as a pruning knife, so that we may stop channeling all our energies into the pursuit of temporal things. Sorrow, tribulation, ill health, and disappointment have a way of stimulating spiritual growth and fruitfulness. Our attention is then redirected toward eternal things, and we produce the fruits of righteousness that glorify His name. Spiritual fruitfulness often comes through the pruning knife of affliction.”

Connection to Scripture

“Within Jewish tradition, the vine was a picture of Israel. God brought a vine out of Egypt and planted it in the promised land (Psalm 80:8-18). It had been ravaged by wild animals and needed protecting and re-establishing. The vineyard of Israel, said Isaiah in chapter 5, has borne wild grapes instead of proper ones. Other prophets used the same picture.

Now Jesus is saying that he is the ‘true vine.’ This can only mean that he is, in himself, the true Israel. He is the one on whom God’s purposes are now resting. And his followers are members of God’s true people - if they belong to him and remain ‘in’ him. The picture of the ‘vine’ isn’t just a clever illustration from gardening. It is about who Jesus and his people really are, and what is now going to happen to them as a result.”
Personal Connection

“The basic imagery of this passage emphasizes the communal and relational nature of the Christian faith. Thus, the parable of the Vine Challenges all of us whose lives have been constructed largely on the modern idea of the sovereign individual; from this standpoint acts in a community tend to be seen as outside the central spaces of our lives. The church thus appears as something we are “part of,” apart from our major spheres of life at home and work. Jesus’ parable, however, through its imagery suggest a living and growing community of faith, a site of productivity and increase. Based on its presence on the vine, each branch is to recognize its part in the whole and do its part. That part involves the production of fruits, or goods, which accrue not to the private good of the individual but to the good of the whole. Or, to extend the logic of the simile, these fruits accrue to the farmer: they are God’s goods, with a view to which God planted and tended the vine. Thus, the passage is ultimately about divine providence and the goodness of creation when it acknowledges its dependence on the Creator.

The theological task is to allow this image to stimulate critical reflection on our churches and ourselves in them. The passage reminds us who we are in the scheme of things framed by Jesus’ command of a self-giving love. Insofar as we have received of God’s providence—including a comfortable share of the goodness of creation—we are called to witness in both confession and action. Our witness—as the passage clarifies—is that “you bear much fruit” and become disciples; and in this God is glorified (v.8).”

Application

“We know that John’s community was in a precarious situation—their choice to believe in and follow Jesus made them suspect in the eyes of the established religious authority and subject to excommunication (see John 9:13-34). Community was everything. To be cast out—homeless, landless, family-less—was the ultimate shame and fate. John’s community is struggling to redefine community, given the reality and impact of Jesus on the lives of people who believed in him.

If we stay with the vine metaphor in the context of John’s reality, we find quite a comforting picture. God is in control as vine grower; the vine and the fruit of the vine are gifts from God. In the Old Testament, Israel saw itself as a vine planted and cared for by God. However, Israel often disappointed God because it failed to be fruitful (communal, compassionate, focused on justice). Israel proves not to be the true vine.

In John’s mind, there are branches that do not produce fruit. They fail to live in love and are concerned only with themselves. It is all about them and not the community. John takes a familiar image and reworks it to set forth a vision for his people. The community that Jesus calls forth is one that embodies and African Proverb: Ubuntu—I am, because we are. The branches that do not yield fruit are the ones in the community who profess faith but do not engage in acts of love. This does not mean that one can earn salvation; rather, those who see and hear Jesus are moved to respond to the gift of salvation through their own acts of love. In other words, a sign of discipleship is doing good works for the right reasons.
Thus, Jesus takes the common everyday image of the vine and transforms it into a symbol of community, mission, and love. This community is characterized by interdependence, mutual respect, and the ongoing presence of Christ.

We must remain in the community. There is no such thing as a solitary Christian. We can’t go it alone.

Connection to the Wesley Readings

Created for the Glory of God

“God created us in order that we should use all the powers with which we were created to the glory of God. And what are these powers? Wesley spells them out: intellectual, attitudinal, and physical” (106).

“Wesley suggest that the fullest development of these powers leads to the glory of God” (106).

“Wesley’s view is quite contrary to this reasoning. God creates the human for the sake of flourishing, of full development, and this development tends toward God’s Glory” (106).

Our Intellectual Powers

“God the creator is not glorified through our denigration but through the wonder of who we were created to be” (107).

Our Attitudinal Powers

“The richer our emotional capacities, the greater are our capacities to give and receive love toward and from God and others” (107).

Our Physical Powers

“Having been endowed with bodies, we are to develop our bodies to the fullest of their powers, to the glory of God” (107).

To the Glory of God

“The glory of God is, finally, nothing other than the love of God” (108).

“God is a pure fountain of love--not abstractly, not philosophically, not in isolated splendor. Rather, God’s very nature is to love, and through loving, to elicit our own loving in return. Love is, of all things, relational; and the God whose name and nature is love is relational, through and through” (108).