

Fruitfulness

Henry Cloud in his book *Necessary Endings* writes that God created life cycles and that all of us go through seasons, and there are things that have to end.

As we approach this new year, it is a time for beginnings and a time for endings.

But, we all know that we are not very good at ending or letting go of things.

For example, Jim's dad never threw anything away and things were always stored in the attic. Maybe you can identify with this. Every time we would see him, he would say he had sleeping bags in that attic that our son Mark could have. Of course, these sleeping bags were from the 1950's that Jim and his brothers used. They looked like green army sleeping bags and were not waterproof. The funny thing is that Mark had a sleeping bag that he got from North Face, and believe me, this bag would last in the North Pole. So why use an old 1950's sleeping bag?

Well, the Bible is full of stories of endings and beginnings. God called Abraham out of Ur to go to the land of Canaan when he was 75 years old. God calls the Israelites to leave Egypt after being enslaved there for 400 years. Jesus calls the disciples Andrew and Peter to leave their fishing and come follow him. (Matt. 4:19).

Henry Cloud says it this way:

Endings are a part of life. They are woven into the fabric of life itself, both when it goes well, and also when it doesn't. On the good side of life, for us to ever get to a new level, a new tomorrow, or the next step, something has to end. For there to be anything new, old things have to end, and we have to let go of

them. Getting to the next level always requires ending something, leaving it behind, and moving on. Growth demands that we move on.

This is a saying that says the same thing. “You see we cannot get to the Promise Land until we let go of Egypt. “

What is it that God wants for us for this new year in regard to endings and our own growth?

In John chapter 15, we get a picture of this. God desires for us to be fruitful and this entails that God is active in the process. The passage is really an allegory of how fruitfulness comes about.

Let us read this section John Chapter 15: verses 1-8.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.. verse. 8- This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Let's first look at the context of this account. This scene is part of the final discourse that Jesus has with his disciples. They have eaten a meal together in the Upper room, Jesus has predicted that someone will betray him, and then he gives them this allegory. This will be his last conversation with his disciples before he is crucified and resurrected.

One can imagine the importance of this time. What does He say to his disciples whom he has loved for three years and knows His time on earth is drawing to an end? He wants them to know this= how they will remain fruitful even after he leaves to go to the Father. This is a crucial moment, and one they will remember when he is gone.

Now we don't know where this conversation takes place - are they still in the upper room or as some scholars suggest they might be walking to the Garden of Gethsemane before he is arrested.

It is here that Jesus says to the disciples, " I am the True vine." This is the last of the I am sayings in John. John is the Gospel writer that gives us 6 "I am" sayings. Jesus says - I am the Bread of life (John 6:35), I am the Light of the world (John 8:12) I am the Good Shepherd (John 10:11) I am the Resurrection and the Life (John 11:25) and I am the Way, the Truth ,and the Life (John 14:60). Yet, with this last I Am saying, it is the only one that is mentioned together with the Father. I am the True Vine and my Father is the gardener. The Father and the Son work together. They are One. They are not separate..

We read that the Father is the gardener. What does this mean? The word literally means farmer. The Father is the expert in growing grapes. Success in raising any crop depends largely on the skill of the farmer or the gardener. He tends it, waters it, protects it, cultivates it so that it will produce its maximum yield.

This account is really about how growth happens in us. And we only get there by the work of the Father and the Son. God does not want us to be an average crop or just ordinary grapes that are produced. He has something much more in mind. You see the question is not what we intend ourselves to be, but what He intends us to become. C. S. Lewis quotes it in this way in his book Mere Christianity, " We may be content to remain what we

call “ordinary people” but He is determined to carry out a quite different plan. All the time He knew His plan for us. God’s desire is for our perfection; and no power in the whole universe, except you ,yourself, can prevent Him from taking you to that goal. That is what you are in for.”

So the Father as the Gardener does not give up on us to become more than what we think we are.

Jesus then goes on to describe himself as the True Vine. Now, any Jewish person would have understand what Jesus meant in this description of himself. Because all throughout the O.T., Israel, is called the vine. Yet when Israel is referred to as this, it is often connected to a vine that is degenerate and does not bear fruit. We read in Isaiah 5:4 “What more could I have done for my vineyard than what I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes why did it only yield bad? And in Jeremiah 2:21 I had planted like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?

Jesus is contrasting himself as the true authentic vine compared to Israel who was often unfaithful to God.

It is in this context that Jesus is telling his disciples, “ Do not be like Israel of the past who did not produce good grapes. Be fruitful. Stay fruitful.”

How then do the disciples stay fruitful?

There are two ways that Jesus tells them that they will be able to produce fruitfulness.

One, they must be pruned to be more fruitful, and the two, they have to abide or remain in Him. You see these two words pruning and abiding go together. They are complementary. You

can not just have one. For any of us to produce lasting fruit, we need both of these.

Jesus says in verse 2 ,”He cuts off any branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

What is pruning- Pruning is the function of cutting away to reduce the extent of something by taking away unwanted parts. To prune, we cut what is unnecessary for the growth of something.

The Greek word for pruning means “trimmed clean.” We are cleaned, or cleansed to be more productive. We often think that this process seems cruel. But, pruning is always in the wise and loving hands of our Father, the gardener.

What does pruning look like?

I remember Jim telling me that every spring he would have to climb into the apple trees in his backyard and prune them. They would be full of sticks that had to be cut. These sticks were called suckers that took the life out of the branches and had to be cut off. It took long hours to cut all of this suckers and there would be piles of them. But eventually, the pruning was finished and then they would be dragged with a tarp into the woods.

Now, in our personal lives, none of us want to be pruned to be more fruitful because a pruning always involves loss. Yet, it is often in the loss that God is shaping us in becoming someone different.

And what kind of fruit is being produced in this process? Even though it is not defined here what the fruit is, there is no doubt that the qualities of Christian character is what is in mind. We

read in Galatians Chapter 5 verses 22-23 about the fruits of the Spirit, that is what God intends to form in us.

I love the way that C.S. Lewis describes this process of pruning in our lives:

No possible degree of holiness which has ever been recorded of the greatest saints is beyond what He is determined to produce in every one of us in the end. The job will not be complete in this life; but He means to get us as far as possible before death.

That is why we must not be surprised if we are in for a rough time. When a man turns to Christ and seems to be getting on pretty well, he often feels that would now be natural if things went fairly smoothly. When troubles come along - illnesses, money troubles, new kinds of temptation - he is disappointed. These things, he feels, might have been necessary to rouse him and make him repent in his bad old days; but why now?

Because God is forcing him on, or up, to a higher level: putting him into situations where he will have to be very much braver, or more patient, or more loving, than he ever dreamed of being before. It seems to us all unnecessary; but that is because we have not yet had the slightest notion of the tremendous thing He means to make of us.

Imagine yourself as a living house. God comes in to rebuild that house. At first, perhaps, you can understand what He is doing. He is getting the drains right and stopping the leaks in the roof and so on: you knew that those jobs needed doing and so you are not surprised. But presently he starts knocking the house about in a way that hurts abominably and does not seem to make sense. What on earth is He up to? The explanation is that He is building quite a different house from the one you thought of- throwing out a new wing here, putting on an extra floor there, running up towers, making courtyards. You thought you were

going to be made into a decent little cottage: but He is building a palace. He intends to come and live in it Himself.

That is what pruning looks like.

Yet, pruning is not all it takes for fruitfulness. Don't let the pain of the pruning, make you neglect the abiding and remaining part. You see pruning involves loss but abiding involves gain because the life of Christ is flowing into us.

We read in verses 4-5: Remain in me and I will remain in you, No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in Him, he will bear much fruit.

The word remain also is translated abide. But, the meaning is make a home with me. Stay with me. The Greek word says "tarry" which means stay for a while.

Abiding is staying close in Him, having a relationship with Him. A Christian is in Christ. The Life of Christ dwells in us.

Now we might ask what does it mean that He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit. It does not say who these people are, but we can be certain that they are dead branches because they have no fruit. There is no real connection to the vine. There is no close connection with Christ.

Now what does this mean practically. I think that God is wanting us to know that there are consequences if we do not let Christ dwell in us.

I know personally what this kind of life looks like because my father unfortunately was example of this. Let me tell the story.

I grew up in a small southern Illinois town. My parents always went to church. When a pastor from Asbury Seminary came to our church, he was so full of Christ's love for all of us, that many of the teenagers took a step of faith to follow Christ. Our parents went not happy about this. My older sister, Tisha, has recounted to me how our mother pressured her as a teenager to not take this Jesus thing so seriously.

My mother was the loyal Irish matriarch of the family and stayed devoted to my dad. Yet my father was never faithful to her. My mother kept this secret about my father's life until the end of his life. When my father knew he was dying of cancer, he demanded that the other woman in his life come and live with him to take care of him. She was younger than myself and was trained as a nurse's aid.

My parents owned apartment buildings so my father's plan was for this woman to come and live with him in one of the apartments. We tried to stop this but all of the deeds for the property were in my father's name not my mother's. So my mother lived next door as my father brought this other woman in to care for him. This caused quite a scandal in the town. My parents had grown up in this town and my father had been part of the business community downtown by owning the Shaffer hardware store.

Later on after our mother died in 2013, my sisters and I found out that my father had a son by a woman in the Phillipines during WW II. This half-brother has since contacted us and lives in Florida. The strange thing is that he looks just like my father and goes by our father's full name.

Now I have to believe my father was an example of a dead branch because he never showed evidence that Christ lived in him even though he went to church.

Now, this does not mean that he did not have some good qualities, he did. He was the one who loved history and as a kid took us to see Gettysburg, The Freedom Trail in Boston, The White House and the Capital. He had a fun side to him too. He took us to the New York World's Fair when I was in middle school, and I still remember the different countries represented by different booths.

But, there was never a sense that my father wanted to follow Christ in his life. Could he have had a different life? Yes. But, abiding in Christ means that we allow Him to do so.

I like what Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor and theologian who died in the concentration camp under Hitler's regime says in regard to this issue of who are the dead branches:

In regard to false professors of faith. It is bound to give itself away sooner or later. There is not need to go about prying into the hearts of others. All we need to do is wait until the tree bears fruit. And we shall not have to wait long. Jesus tells us that men can not keep up appearances for long. The time of vintage is sure to come sooner or later . We shall find out where a person stands.

This is deeply challenging to all of us. Am I longing to follow Christ? Where are the signs of Christ -like character in me? Where is the fruit? Am I abiding in Christ?

In conclusion, the mark of discipleship is fruit bearing. We can be reassured that fruit bearing is not only possible but certain if the branch remains in union with the vine. If the life of Christ permeates a disciple, fruit will be evident and lasting.

May this be for all of us. Amen.

