

The True Vine

John 15:1-13 by Patty Friesen (July 12/15)

The ultimate goal of farming is not the growing of crops,
it is the cultivation and perfection of human beings. - Masanobu Fukuoka
The central place in every culture should be occupied by agriculture. – Colin Duncan

Jesus' declaration as true vine comes on the heels of his other I am declarations in the Gospel of John: chapter 5, I am the Bread of Life, chapter 7, I am the Living Water, chapter 9, I am the Light of the World and today in chapter 15, I am the true vine. Jesus is not some generic vine but the true vine – the real thing. In the Old Testament, Israel was called God's vineyard and God the vineyard owner. But as Jeremiah 2:21 says, I planted you as a fruitful vine, entirely genuine. How have you become a wild vine, turned to bitterness? Israel is no longer the genuine vine – Jesus is. In the Apocrypha, Sirach 14:17-20, an ancient writing not in our bible, Wisdom says, "I bud forth delights like the vine – my blossoms become fruit rich and fair. Come to me, all you who desire me and be filled with my fruit."

Jesus quotes this passage today saying, I am the vine, you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Jesus is the *vitis vinifera*, the fruiting grapevine that produces wine – the elixir of life. *Vitis*, the botanical name for grape, is etymologically related to the word, *vita*, life. Grapes are life, and grapevines, the trees of life. Grapes have been cultivated in the Middle East for over 7000 years. Just under the bark of the grapevine are two layers necessary for the survival of the plant: the xylem and the phloem. The xylem carries water and nutrients up from the roots, through the vine, into the branches

and the leaves. The phloem carries sugars, the products of photosynthesis down from the leaves, through the branches, through the vine, to the roots. It is a reciprocal arrangement of survival, nourishment and fruit - a powerful symbol of our life in Christ.

We may not grow grapes here in Saskatchewan but we do grow saskatoons, wild blueberries, strawberries, haskaps, raspberries and sour cherries, all of which are in full production right now and they are the bushes of life. And we grow trees of life. In the Mennonite villages around here, gnarled cottonwoods with deeply grooved trunks line the village streets and cluster along the edge of farmyards. Cottonwoods are nostalgic meaning for many Mennonites. According to local mythology, the cottonwoods are descended from Russian trees brought to Canada as saplings or seeds by Mennonite immigrants in the 1870's. Some of them were planted on the graves of loved ones.

The emotional connections between people and plants led Susie Fisher, a 31 year old historian to write her doctoral dissertation on Mennonites and their gardens. She said, "I started realizing Mennonites don't talk easily about their emotions." Conversations drifted towards earthly things: trees, plants, gardens, tools, summer kitchens. Mennonites who emigrated from Russia in the late 1800s left behind elaborately cultivated flower gardens and orchards that were central to community life. Russian Mennonites sometimes celebrated weddings and funerals in their gardens. Often family members were buried there. When they came to Canada, they sought to recreate some of that culture here on the prairies.

An agricultural people understandably have deep emotional ties to seeds. One gardener, Fisher spoke to, believes the Mennonites never really got over the trauma of their

migration from Russia. He thought the reason people have so much energy and care for their seeds is that they represent life – that the seeds are life manifest. Fisher isn't Mennonite. When her parents split up her mother sent her to Westgate Mennonite Collegiate in Winnipeg. I wonder if she wanted to give us a spiritual community that she didn't feel she could do on her own, says Fisher. Growing up among Mennonites turned out to be a wonderful thing for her. "It changed my life to be close to a people with a religion and ethnicity that are so intertwined and a life that's so rooted." (Canadian Mennonite, May 25, 2015)

Our spiritual and communal roots as Mennonites are a gift to others as is our gardening and cooking skills. Working the verenike booth at the MCC Sale this year, I met non-Mennonites who were there just for the food – overeating to feed the hungry of the world. One woman across from me in the dining hall was laughing as she dug into her pie and ice cream, "I'm diabetic," she declared. I wondered if we would have to do CPR on her! Food has become our Mission and Service visioning for this next year with our dream of a Parking Lot Potluck for Osler with grilled local meat and garden produce to share with the town.

Young adults may not be interested in church these days but they are interested in good food. Last summer's Foodie Festival under the tents at the Osler schoolyard was brilliant. We had never had seven kinds of meat in one meal before and looking around the food tent, Patrick noted that all the cool Osler Mennonite Church people were there. George Janzen assured us that not all the cool Osler Mennonites were there because he wasn't but enough were there to make the interim pastor job at OMC very attractive to me last summer. Food production is our Osler Mennonite niche – not only in our family businesses but in our church mission and outreach to the community. Food can lead to faith. We had a guy in our church in

Minneapolis who joined the church because of the More with Less cookbook. Our gardening and cooking skills will become even more important in future food production. Indeed it may be the salvation of the world.

Star Phoenix columnist Paul Hanley writes in his book 11, “When I was a youth living in small town Saskatchewan, I was tutored in gardening and self-sufficiency by my elderly neighbours, George and Flossy Fowler. George showed me how to plant, and maintain different vegetables and how to compost and control pests. I learned that it was possible for a family to be substantially self-reliant on a city lot – less than 1/10th of a hectare.” In addition to high yields, intensive urban gardening uses no polluting fuel, no toxic pesticides and no chemical fertilizers. It improves soil quality while using only 1/100 as much energy and 1/8 as much water as commercial agriculture in California.

Hanley saw the benefits of urban farming in the Ukraine where the disaster of collective farming would have left Ukrainians starving long past Stalin if they had not converted their yards to intensive gardens. Every bit of privately owned ground was converted miraculously into potatoes, watermelon and fruit trees, chickens and honeybees. In fact, this private urban gardening sector provided 91% of the population’s potatoes, 75% of its veg, 87% of its berries and over 50% of its meat and milk – crucial to family’s survival and the national economy. (Hanley, 11, p. 147) Gardens have helped Ukrainians survive political upheaval for generations and will save them now.

I am the vine – you are the branches. Who knows where the vine stops and the branches begin? So in Christ, we branches of the worshipping community gathered around

Christ the vine are nourished by Christ. It is the very energy of God that flows through the community. Abide in my love - God's love working itself through us. This love is a gift of salvation that comes from Jesus' union with God and our union with Jesus. It is nothing emotional – something we can feel. This love is not even ethical – something we can do. It is something metaphysical – something we are because of our life in God. God does it – God makes us who we are and gives us love and unity not uniformity in the church.

Joy is another fruit given by God – it is a difficult thing to manufacture on our own but comes when the Spirit is present. There was much joy at our SS picnic at Pine View Farms last month when our new members shared and when we sang together around the campfire even though the songs were theologically questionable. Peace is another fruit of the Spirit – peace not as the world gives but as only Jesus can give – especially in a time of crisis.

Remain in me and bear fruit. We cannot produce fruit apart from God. The branches, thus nourished, produce fruit of love, joy and peace - fruit for the life of the world. Let us pray...