

THE SECRET OF FLOURISHING

Ted Schroder, March 14, 2010

One of the major themes of our history, culture and civilization in the past two hundred or so years has been the search for human fulfillment. Since the Enlightenment and the development of Western civilization, our aim has been to achieve our potential, to fulfill our possibilities, to make our mark, to overcome difficulties, to remove obstacles, and to solve problems. We want to achieve something worthwhile. We want to leave a valuable legacy. We want to become all that we can be. Some feel that they can do it best without God. They don't want to delay their reward until the next world. They want human fulfillment now. Others of us feel that we cannot fulfill our potential unless we discover the purpose of God for our lives. Only then can we properly flourish.

Jesus said, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me, and I in him, he will bear much fruit.; apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

The Bible uses the symbol of the vine to represent the people of Israel.

"You brought a vine out of Egypt, you drove out the nations and planted it.

You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land." (Psalm 80:7-9)

It was planted in the promised land and tended by God to produce fruit. But it did not flourish.

"When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?" (Isaiah 5:3-5)

Israel did not flourish. It did not fulfill its potential. The vineyard disappointed its owner. It showed its true character by its poor results.

Jesus chose this symbol for himself, and in so doing, he pointed out the secret of human flourishing. "I am the true vine." (John 15:1) The true vine stands for what Israel was called to be. Jesus proclaims that the purpose of God entrusted to Israel is in fact being fulfilled in himself. He is the true Israel. He is the faithful remnant. He is the fulfillment of the promises of God. The divine commission to establish the kingdom of God is given to him and those whom he calls. The vine bears fruit through its branches. His whole emphasis is on bearing fruit.

"I am the vine and you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, apart from me you can do nothing.... This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourself to be my disciples." (John 15:5,8)

The key to human flourishing, to fruitfulness, is to be grafted into the vine so that the sap of the vine flows into you. We have to be attached to Jesus, to be connected to the life and love of God that flows through Jesus. We are to spiritually remain in him, abide in intimate relationship with him, live in him. Disconnection, detachment from Jesus, holding Jesus at arms length, maintaining a purely intellectual belief, without an experiential dimension to faith, results in sterility. "If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers, such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned." (John 15:6)

Branches that decide to go it alone, to try to live without being connected to the vine, will wither and die, and are good for nothing. We are grafted to the Vine, connected to Jesus by an act of faith. The person who lives for himself, and by himself, who seeks to be self-sufficient, who seeks to flourish and find fulfillment by himself, who tries to be a spiritual person, even a Christian believer, without a worshipping and fellowship connection to Christ and his Body, will end up being burned out, and his life will turn to ashes.

How do we become and remain connected to Christ? By faith and commitment. We become united to Christ by faith, and by so doing we become part of the people of God -

those who follow him. We can't flourish by going it alone, by trying to be a productive Christian on our own. We need to be part of a community of faith. Thomas E. Reynolds writes,

“human life seeks more than survival alone. It seeks to flourish and find itself affirmed within a larger framework of value and purpose. Life seeks delight in living; it seeks joy. And this is not something found in separateness and self-sufficiency, but rather in belonging with others. The basic question of human existence is whether there is welcome at the heart of things, whether we can find a home with others who recognize us, value us, and empower us to become ourselves. Is there space for me in the world? Is there a safe place where I can flourish? Will I be accepted and embraced..... Communities are a manifestation of the need to belong.....human beings are vulnerable beings who need each other....We all belong to a common, broken humanity. We all have wounded vulnerable hearts. Each one of us needs to feel appreciated and understood; we all need help.” (*Vulnerable Communion*, 118,119,129)

But in every community, whether it be a church, or a family, we experience pain through rejection, lack of sympathy or appreciation, or misunderstanding. We are tempted to leave, to distance ourselves, to protect ourselves against further suffering, but if we do, we end up alone. Jesus said: “My father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” (John 15:2) Pruning is a thoroughly normal and necessary part of gardening. It results in new and fresh growth. We are being pruned all the time through our life in the community that is attached to Christ. That pruning is meant to make us more fruitful. It should not cause us to run away from the gardener. When we experience pain we should ask ourselves, “What is God wanting to me to learn from this? How can it help me to bear more fruit?”

Jesus expanded on this analogy of the vine and the branches by explaining that remaining in him meant remaining in his love. Living each day in the love of Christ means following his word. “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” (John 15:11) If there could be any definition of human flourishing it must include this joy of the Spirit of Christ. The way to joy is abiding in Christ, living in his love, following his word. It results in answered prayer.

What is the fruit that lasts – the fruit that Christ has chose us and appointed us to bear? It is to love each other. The *sine qua non* of the true vine, that tells the good fruit from the bad, for “by their fruit you will know them” (Matt.7:20), is “My command is this: love each other as I have loved you.” (John 15:12) Love for each other is the indispensable condition or qualification that distinguishes the true vine from the false. Jesus is the true bearer of the love of God. The world can tell whether we are connected to the true vine by whether we love one another.

What is the secret of satisfaction? “I am the bread of life.” What is the secret of illumination? “I am the light of the world.” What is the secret of access? “I am the door.” What is the secret of leadership? “I am the good shepherd.” What is the secret of life? “I am the resurrection and the life.” What is the secret of progress? “I am the way, the truth and the life.” What is the secret of flourishing? “I am the true vine.” This is the way of the sevenfold secret of knowing God and the purpose of life. It is to know Christ who is the image of the invisible God. To find Christ is to find life in all its fullness.

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