

Canopy Management

John 15:1-8 | 4/29/2018

When Bob and Patty Brower traveled in France in the '70s, they fell in love with two things: the wineries and the French Country chateaus. They came home and packed up their belongings and headed for California, looking for a spot to start a winery of their own. They settled on 16 acres tucked away in the hills of Monterey County. They built an estate building, Chateau Julien, modeled after an actual chateau on the Swiss/French border. In 1982 they started making wine. Today they have more than 240 acres of grapes.

But there have been problems. Of the many issues that must be addressed in making good wine, one that is frequently overlooked is canopy management. Jesus said, "He [the Gardener] cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes" (John 15:2 NIV). That's canopy management.

Here's the problem canopy management addresses: runaway growth. Vines left to themselves will sprawl out all over the place and produce huge canopies of shoots, leaves and branches, and unless that canopy is controlled, the vine won't yield much fruit or quality grapes. Looks good, but doesn't *do* good.

For example, pick up a glass of California Sauvignon Blanc, and take a sip. Daniel Sogg, a writer for Wine Spectator, says that if you catch a flavor "reminiscent of onion skin and jalapeño peppers," you've just encountered the problem of canopy management. A vine with a huge canopy may be looking good, but it isn't doing good.

Jesus is afraid that the disciples might face this same problem. He wasn't interested in showy disciples any more than he is interested in showy churches and showy Christians today. What he is interested in is fruit — and not just fruit — excellent fruit.

The image of the vine is used several times in Scripture as a metaphor for the relationship between God and God's people. Israel is described as the "vineyard of the Lord Almighty" in Isaiah 5, and Jesus picks up this image in John 15 in describing his relationship to his disciples. A grapevine is really a community — many individual branches interconnected and intertwined, but all designed for the sole purpose of bearing fruit. While the individual branches are important, it's the collective quality of the whole crop that determines whether the wine will be labeled as excellent, mediocre or "just plain cheap".

God, like any good winemaker, understands the need to control the canopy. The goal of canopy control is threefold:

First, you want to develop a vine structure that makes picking and disease control relatively easy. With a huge covering of branches and large leaves, it is difficult to even see the fruit, let alone pick it.

Herein lies a problem for the church and all of us. Sometimes the external paraphernalia; rules, paraments, arguments, and theological nit-picking get in the way or the world seeing the real fruit we have to offer. Our conventions and traditions sometimes keep the world from seeing the fruit. They think all we have to offer is the outward appearance – the leaves.

We grow under the watchful eye of the community around us. The world is full of people searching for the truth, for a sense of meaning for their lives. And we have the Good News. The fruit is hanging lush from our branches. But we tend to hide it behind the very showy and at times meaningless appearances of nonessential issues. Jesus called it, using another metaphor, "hiding our light under a bushel basket."

The church has fine baskets. But the world doesn't need baskets; it needs light. The world doesn't need shoots, leaves and branches; it needs fruit. Are we going to allow God to pare back the canopy, so our fruit is visible to the world walking by?

Next, you want to regulate the size and quality of the fruit. Sogg tells us that “a huge crop buried under a dense thicket of vegetation translates into lousy wine.” God is concerned about quality. He wants a superior product.

The mantra of the church for over a generation has been “church growth.” Notice that Jesus doesn’t call the vine to grow, he calls it to bear fruit. Our mantra ought to be “church fruit.” When God takes the pruning shears to your life, or to the church, it’s not an issue of whether you are growing, but of *what* you are growing. Of course there will be some fruit, but the quality of the fruit you are bearing matters. A sour grape is fruit, but it’s still sour.

Finally, the aim of canopy control is to strike a balance between growing leaves and growing fruit. Without shoots, leaves and branches, you can’t have fruit. We are not people without a life — and it is within that life that the fruit grows. God tells us not only to get a life, but to get “an abundant life.” But it must be a life under control, a life that is best suited to render the fruit of the Spirit.

What to do? Jesus says that we must “abide” in him. He says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” God is the one who watches over the whole process. But we must abide in him. And if we go it alone, we’ll dry up, become so much dead wood, and we’ll be hauled away for the trash bin.

Consider this fable, or parable if you will. A grape branch struggled mightily to hold on to the four huge, tightly packed clusters of grapes. The fruit emitted strong wafts of delicious aroma, and the look of the grapes seemed to insist on being picked and eaten. The branch could not hold back the self-confident satisfaction deep within. It *knew* it was a grape bearing branch. Obviously the very best at that.

So the branch decided it would be just fine on its own. “Once a grape branch, always a grape branch,” it assured itself. It detached itself from the vine. It had neither intention of being anything less than a healthy, beautiful, productive grape branch. It just felt that being connected to the vine was no longer necessary. After all, its identity could never be changed! ...

Before long, though, the branch no longer felt strong and vigorous. In fact, it felt utterly drained and limp. Its grapes withered and dropped off. So did its leaves. Eventually it looked like nothing more than a stick. Eventually it was broken up, and all that remained of it were small particles whose nutrients were absorbed by other plants.

The other branches, still attached to the vine and plentifully nourished by it, produced a bountiful harvest for the master of the vineyard. They saw that, without the vine, their comrade could do nothing. And as they looked at the bare spot of earth a scant foot away from the vine, they realized again that to continue as grape branches they needed to continue being attached to the grapevine. (Mark Roth, “Jesus, the true vine,” Christian Light Publications, May 16, 1999)

Wine expert Sogg concludes that with proper canopy control, a winemaker is able to produce a wine that is a “friend to food.”

What Jesus is saying to his disciples is that with proper canopy control, abiding in Him, the vine, we can produce quality fruits of the Spirit, fruit that is a “friend to faith”. So let’s be aware of where we might need some canopy control, and make sure we stay connected to the Vine, our Lord Jesus Christ.

Pastor Keith