

SPIRITUAL ORCHARDS

God is in the business of growing spiritual orchards. In John 15: 1-8, Jesus uses the analogy of a grape orchard with its vines and branches to talk about how God's wants to bring us into union with Himself. Jesus said that if we're not connected to Him, we will have no fruit. There are many in the Christian community who believe that bearing fruit for Christ comes primarily through the programs of their congregation. Thus, if there are not any new people coming to church, it must be because of a problem with the ministries. It is true that exciting ministries in the areas of Christian Education or Worship or Youth can draw many new folks. Our pews can be packed. But until each of those people are motivated and challenged to teach others about God's love and forgiveness through Jesus Christ. We tend to forget why we are called to be the Church of Jesus Christ, but it is multiplication, not just in numbers, but in hearts of the faithful. We have what the world desperately needs. Wall Street doesn't have it. Madison Avenue doesn't have it. Even Disneyland doesn't have it. We have been given the very life that the world seeks. So why aren't we producing more fruit?

To help and encourage others to find their life in the vine, we must be convinced and be living testimony to the truth that apart from His life, we have no life. As Paul said, "Apart from Christ, I am nothing." If we, the branches, are not bearing much fruit, it may be that we are not feeding as we ought to on the life-giving flow from the vine. We need nourishment - spiritual nourishment - if we are to bear fruit.

How does this happen? Jesus tells us when He says that the gardener, who is God, will prune back the branches in order that they may be more productive. Most of us do not get up each morning and pray for God to prune back any branches in our life that are not producing fruit. Pruning means suffering and that is definitely something we do everything possible to avoid. Yet, without the suffering that our loving Father allows to come into our lives, we are not aware of how weak we become when we rely on our own strength and abilities. When was the last time you admitted to God that you could not solve something,

or find the strength to walk through a situation that was especially difficult? And yet, when we admit, confess, and surrender our weakness and asking for His strength, we keep connected to the vine.

We are created by God in order to bear fruit. If a part of our life is not bearing fruit, God will prune it. Apart from the life of the vine, we can produce nothing. God will be the final judge of whether our lives have been fruitful. It is not our job to judge the quality or the amount of our fruit. Our responsibility is to stay connected to the vine. He can do a might work through our lives if we will only remain faithful.

The Rev. Bert Eaton is Rector of St. Peter's by-the-Sea Episcopal Church , located at 503 W. Broad St. in Swansboro.