



There was this one church building with a vine behind the altar: as a visual tribute to the surrounding land. Go out the main driveway and to the right, you could spend an entire afternoon picking through the most scrumptious blueberries. Go to the left, and you could smell the overly tantalizing grapes. A little further away would be the freshest apples and peaches that would put those in the nearby grocery store to absolute shame. Needless to say, there was much first-hand experience with the Gospel story of vine-growing and fruit-bearing: so much nourishment

not just for the body, but even for the soul, traveling through some of nature's most wonderful bounty.

But, in front of that wall vine, just as much spiritual nourishment ensued in that sanctuary that many children of God thoroughly crave in any church building: for Christmas Eve by candlelight, Easter Sunday Resurrection trumpet blasts, children sermons with adorable youth, baptisms with precious cooing from infants and maybe some screams thrown in, too, and on and on we could go with weddings and funerals and organs and guitars and weeknight choir rehearsing and weekday personal reflecting. It was almost as if that vine served not just as a visual tribute to the land surrounding the building, but as a reminder that the very vine of Jesus Christ was always going to find a way to bear the fruit of hope and love and compassion no matter where they came from or whatever they brought into the pews that was weighing on their hearts and minds.

All well and good, to be sure, but there was another vine in the building that offered its fair share of soothing nourishment. When you first walked in the front door, there was this bench off to the right in the entryway, with hanging purple grapes painted in on the backrest. Now, sometimes that bench would be covered with canned goods or cereal boxes for the food pantry. Other times it would be filled with notebooks and pencils for school kits to be made for Lutheran World Relief. But for the remaining just-as-precious of time, it would be completely empty for someone to just sit and wait: sit and wait for a spouse to finish Sunday school or a friend after a meeting. Sit and wait for a parent to come pick up their teenage child after youth group. And in that sitting and waiting, it would often present a perfect opportunity for more of the...engaging conversations to ensue.

Because, with all due respect to that other massive vine, in front of that, the most frequent exchanges between children of God of all ages were short and courteous. For starters, the church-goers didn't exactly have the tendency of showing up much before the prelude started. And then, there might be a quick greeting while sharing some peace in the middle of the worship. Finally, as they walked out the door, they obviously had other things that needed attention: groceries had to be shopped for, not to mention, there was a rather tasty restaurant across the street perfect for a Sunday brunch. Of course, some believed the fate of their favorite professional football team depended on them being in a certain chair in their living room so many minutes before kickoff, and then some had to tend to vineyards or gardens or acres of other farmland. There wasn't much time to really dig in on life, on God, in front of that eye-catching vine.

And so that bench with its own simple, but still beautiful vine, provided a rather sacred space to just sit and wait: sit and wait and dig in to the breath-taking beauty of nature's bounty, as well as the breath-taking beauty of God. Some of those elderly or teenage or whatever other age children of God, when given an opportunity to do so, would wonder out loud if they had any fruit to share at all: if they could make any difference whatsoever on the world. Some of those older wondered if they had run their course: if they had any energy, anything at all left to give. Could this Gospel of Jesus being the vine and them being the branches have any truth for them anymore? Some of the younger were told they weren't

good enough: they weren't doing enough on the field or in the classroom or at home; some of them wondered if God had forgotten about them in the fruit-blessing from the supposedly universal vine of Jesus Christ.

Except, with this Risen Lord, we boldly proclaim that the bountiful supply of hope and love and compassion never ever runs out: and not just in the heavens, but down here, too. Down here in what can often feel like the dirt and grime of life, there is still more than enough hope and love and compassion, no matter the age, no matter the physical ability. This Lord of ours insists that you are more than enough. That you are cherished branches worthy of all the fruit of God's most beautiful vineyard, not only for your own nourishment, but to share with all you meet.

Come to think of it, in front of that vine in the sanctuary, it was rather fitting to sing the hymn as offerings were combined to do even more fruit-bearing; they would sing: "Let the vineyards be fruitful, Lord, And fill to the brim our cup of blessing. Gather a harvest from the seeds that were sown, That we may be fed with the bread of life. Gather the hopes and dreams of all; Unite them with the prayers we offer now. Grace our table with Your presence, and give us A foretaste of the feast to come."

Maybe if they could have spared a few extra moments, they should have added a few words: knowing that God not only emerges from altar tables, but family dinner tables, too, or out in vineyards as we play in the bounty of Creation, and even on random entryway benches, where all people need to do is just sit and wait, just long enough to remember that the Gospel still applies, no matter the age, no matter the energy, no matter what the rest of the world may say, no matter how long we wait for whatever else to happen in this life. But, there's no need to wait for some heavenly feast to happen. It's already happening in the vine that has reached down from the heavens into the whole world in our Risen Lord, Jesus Christ. There is more than enough hope and love and compassion for all of us, and more than enough to share that Gospel that will never be taken away. For that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!