

May 2, Easter 5B (John 15:1-8)

The vine branch doesn't put "make grapes" on its to-do list. It just makes them.

by [Melissa Earley](#) in the [April 21, 2021](#) issue

My church wasn't growing. I was serving a recently merged church in my first solo appointment as a United Methodist pastor, and the church was supposed to be growing. I had been appointed to this "turnaround" congregation, told it needed me because I was creative and energetic. They said I had potential to make this church bear fruit, and I believed them. My church was supposed to be growing, but it wasn't.

I had participated in a two-year program on congregational development put on by my annual conference. Every month a different visionary leader armed with a PalmPilot on one hip and a cell phone on the other (this was the early 2000s), with cowboy swagger that was both bravado and "Aw shucks, was God faithful," was paraded in front of us with the same story. He—they were almost all men—would tell us with a mix of self-effacing stories and hushed intensity about the strategies he'd implemented to turn around his faltering congregation. The message was always the same: if we did the right things and implemented the right strategy, God would be faithful and our ministry would bear fruit.

I had tried many of their ideas. Sometimes my church went along with me, and sometimes I ventured out on my own. I'd taken visitors mugs stuffed with packets of hot chocolate, tea, and a cheery note inviting them back to worship. I'd encouraged members to bring friends. I'd held neighborhood movie nights. I got known in the community through my involvement organizing for better schools.

We grew some, a few new members here and there. But after several years I was exhausted and my congregation was cranky. I'd read the church growth books that promised if we addressed our weak areas, or focused on our strengths, or just refused to die, then we would grow. They often quoted Jesus on the vine, the branches, and producing fruit. The implication was obvious: if our church wasn't

growing, then something must be wrong with us. Or with me. Maybe I'd squandered my potential.

I called Larry, my former senior colleague and a wise mentor. At lunch I laid out my question. "How do you know if the problem in the church is you or if it's them?" I listed the books I'd read and the strategies they'd prescribed and the many, many ways I was failing as a pastor. I wanted Larry to give me the secret to turning my church around so I could live up to my potential. I wanted bragging rights and my own swagger.

Larry thought for a moment. "It sounds like what you're learning"—I leaned in, eager for his sage advice—"is to stop reading those books." I was so surprised and delighted that I laughed out loud.

And I did stop. I stopped reading books that told me I was inadequate, that predicted my church would close unless I led better, the congregation tried harder, and we all turned into something we weren't. I started reading fiction again. I read mysteries and chick lit and good literature. I read theology and sermons and even a bit of poetry.

I stopped attending conferences and workshops that just gave me and my congregation more tasks to do. I invested in parts of the community where I was genuinely interested, not where it was strategically important.

I began to see the strengths of my church. They genuinely liked each other. They had a deep history of supporting each other through difficult times. They forgave the more difficult people their faults. They took people who had stopped driving to doctor appointments, and no one grieved without a freezer full of casseroles. We didn't have a lot of church-sponsored mission programs, but church folks were involved in ministry. A faithful bunch provided the meal at a local soup kitchen once a month. A man who lived on the edge of homelessness was given odd jobs by parishioners so he could fix his car and keep his job. The congregation rallied around two boys whose single mother was overwhelmed with her own health problems. One member invited the two boys to dinner once a week and checked in on school progress. A retired army captain made sure they got haircuts. We celebrated their improved grades.

This wasn't a dying church. It was a small church. It was an under-resourced church. It was a church that struggled to pay its bills and keep its building up. It would never

be the church that paid for conference-wide initiatives. But it was a church that was bearing fruit.

I had been hearing Jesus' words as a threat. If we didn't bear fruit, it meant that we had become disconnected from the vine and we would be tossed out and burned. But what his words are is a promise. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit." The vine branch doesn't put "make grapes" on its to-do list. It just makes them, because it's part of the vine. And it never makes pears or avocados or olives—when we are connected to Jesus, we bear the fruit of Jesus. We may not bear the kind of fruit that's brag-worthy at church conferences or that judicatory officials praise. But connected to Jesus, the fruit of our ministry will be good.