

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

19th June 2022 – Confirmation and First Communion Service

JOHN 15:1-6

GROWING IN GOD TOGETHER

In the midst of all the other things we have going on around us at the moment, a lot of talk in the media is about the price of fresh fruit and vegetables. I heard someone say the other day, ‘you wouldn’t know there is a war going on in Ukraine right now, when the lead story on the news today is that we may no longer get salad with our pub schnitzel because lettuce is too expensive!’ And alongside the stories of how expensive lettuce is or how hard it is to buy fresh broccoli, we have lots of stories and tips and features on how you can grow your own fresh fruit and veges at home. I know that some of you are good and dedicated vege gardeners, but I’m not. I like planting bushes and shrubs and ornamental plants which I can just leave to grow with a bit of care, but a vege garden gets away from me too quick. I’m not enough of a dedicated and caring gardener that I get to enjoy what is grown in my garden.

While I am not a very good vege gardener, my father is opposite, and when we were growing up I remember that in every place we lived dad had a large and productive vegetable garden. It was obviously something he loved doing, but my memory is that we very rarely had to buy vegetables; mum would yell out the kitchen window, ‘Rob, can we have some carrots and beans for dinner?’, and with a, ‘No worries, Dearie’, they’d be delivered fresh to the kitchen. In Dad’s garden, the plants always seemed to be growing strong and healthy; large lettuces and cabbages side by side, bean vines growing on trellises with pods of their seeds hanging off of them, large and juicy watermelons and rock melons in the summer, rows of carrot tops popping out of the ground, corn stalks with golden cobs. My father had a love for his gardens, and worked to ensure they produced as best as they could.

And when I think back on it, there’s probably 3 main stages I remember about Dad and his gardening: prepare the soil well so the plants can have a good foundation and get all they need to grow strong; tend to the plants as they grow, protecting them, taking off the parts which aren’t

productive, removing weeds, water and feed them so they keep growing; and then pick and enjoy what is produced by your loving and caring work. Three basic and simple steps for good gardening.

It's not only my father who is a gardener, in our Gospel reading from John 15 Jesus says, 'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.' (v. 1b) As a gardener we can break down what God does in growing us, as His children, as people of faith, into those three basic steps of gardening that I learnt from my father: preparing the soil for a strong and deeply rooted foundation; caring for and tending the vine as it grows; and then harvesting and enjoying the 'fruit' which is produced.

A healthy soil is vital for growth. In the first reading we have today, Joshua chapter 1, as the Israelites are about to go into the land God had promised them, a land where there were already living large and strong nations who didn't want to give it up, God said to them, 'Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the Lord your God will be with you wherever you go.' (Joshua 1:9b NIV) This promise of God's love and care for us whatever we go through is there for us throughout the Bible. It's a promise which was lived out for us in Jesus' living, dying, and rising again for us. This promise of God's love, care, strength, and protection provides the soil and foundation which keeps us strong in our lives. When times are hard and challenging for us, and for the young people we are celebrating with today you will have challenges in life as we all do, maybe times when you feel under pressure, don't know who to turn to, maybe even find it hard to see and feel where God is in it all. At those times we remember not just the promises of God but also the actions of God, both those we hear of in the Bible and those we've experienced in our lives. God's love and strength is a deep, rich soil which helps us to grow in Him.

And then there's the growing part of our faith for us, which Jesus describes when He says, 'I am the vine, and you are the branches. If you stay joined to me, and I stay joined to you, then you will produce lots of fruit. But you cannot do anything without me.' (John 15:5 CEV) Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. If we think about the way a grapevine works, which is what Jesus is referring to here, everything that branch needs come from the vine; the branch dies if it is separated from the vine. To continue to grow in our faith, to stay strong in God whatever we go through, and

to produce the fruit we will talk about in a minute, we need to stay joined to Jesus. How do we do that? We remember our Baptism, the new life we were given and the promises which were made to us, and we live in the assurance and guarantee of our Baptism each day. We read, we hear, we share, we reflect on God's Word and allow the Spirit to feed and water us through that Word so we can grow. We come to receive the body and blood of Jesus in the Lord's Supper, as six young people will be doing with us for the first time today; touching God's love for us, tasting God's love for us, hearing those words which help us to grow; 'given and shed *for you* for the forgiveness of sins'. We worship together; praising and thanking God for His love and bringing our prayers to Him. We fellowship with our fellow Christians; supporting, encouraging, praying for one another. We stay joined to the vine, so we can grow and produce fruit.

The final part of this manual for growing, is producing the fruit. Our reading from Galatians 5 sums that up really well: '22 God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, 23 gentle, and self-controlled.' (Galatians 5:22-23a CEV) It's about having that faith in God, and through our gratitude for what He has done for us, a desire to live His way because we know that's what's best for us, and wanting to share His love with others, that we now want to produce this fruit. We know we don't or won't produce it perfectly, but it's what we try to do. Being firmly grounded, and joined to the branch, God can now work through us to produce this fruit which further shows His love in the world.

When we look at these three stages of what we might call the 'gardening of our faith', we can see the work of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit in there. But we need to remember that very often God does this 'gardening' work through us, His people. As we this morning witness four young men confirm their faith, and as we welcome six young people to receive Holy Communion with us, we know that God has been working through a lot of people to get them to this point in their life of faith. Their parents, without whom they wouldn't be here; not just not alive, but not here in church today doing these things. Grandparents, godparents, and other family and friends who have nurtured and supported them, perhaps pulling out some weeds, pouring on some fertilizer, pruning or tying

back a straying branch at some time. All of their teachers and pastors. The congregation and other Christians who have grown, encouraged and supported them. Thank God for all of those people He has worked through to enable the faith of these young people to grow. But the growing isn't finished; they, like us, will continue to grow. God's desire is that they and we will continue to grow in our faith throughout our lives, so that we will be like those old gnarled grape vines which still produce that fruit of love, joy, peace, which He calls us to share. As they grow, as we grow, as we are all grounded in God's love and joined to Jesus, we are all called to continue to do what we can, to give up what we need to, to forgive, to encourage, to pray for, to make helping this growth of others to be the priority of all we do together.

Growing in God together. For the ten young people for whom this is a special day in their lives of faith, we continue to pray for them. We thank God for who they are, each one of them, and that His Spirit is alive in them. May they, and we, continue to grow in our faith, and to allow God to work through us so others can grow in their faith also. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

The Vine And The Branches

- What does it mean to you to be joined to Jesus?
- Are there times in your life, situations you are in, things you go through, when you don't feel joined to Him?
- Reflect on how your Baptism, receiving Jesus' body and blood in Holy Communion, and reading and hearing God's Word helps you to stay joined to Him.
- Pray for God's help to keep this 'connection' with Jesus when you feel it is not here or under threat.

Producing Fruit

Read Galatians 5:22-23 and think about the Fruit of the Spirit listed there.

- How do you go in showing this Fruit in your life? Are there any which you particularly struggle to show?
- How does your showing this Fruit help others to experience God's love and come to know Him?

Always Growing

- Reflect on your faith in different stages in your life; has it grown, is it up and down, does it continue to grow?
- Ask God to help you continue to grow in your faith throughout your life, staying close to Jesus and producing the Fruit of the Spirit.

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