

VINE-RIPENED THEOLOGY
© Dr. Gary Blaine
University Congregational Church
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Reading: Psalm 107: 35-38 (ESV)

He turns a desert into pools of water, a parched land into springs of water. And there he lets the hungry dwell, and they establish a city to live in; they sow fields and plant vineyards and get a fruitful yield. By his blessing they multiply greatly, and he does not let their livestock diminish.

When I was a child I hated spinach. My elementary school cafeteria often served canned spinach with a wedge of hard-boiled egg on top. The spinach was a mass of green slimy organic matter that looked as though it had just been retrieved from the compost bin. The egg had absorbed the chlorophyll and perched in green estate upon that moldering blob. This was long before Dr. Seuss had taught us about green eggs and ham. We all knew that eggs were white and this presentation was just not right.

One year my father decided to plant spinach in our garden. I thought it was a terrible idea. Even adults did not eat the stuff they served in school! But my father was never to be questioned, so spinach was planted, hoed, watered, and sprayed. The day finally came when we harvested the spinach. My mother made a salad of it,

and yes, there were hard-boiled eggs on it and bits of crispy-fried bacon. Because it was served we ate it. I was amazed at the taste. This was not the spinach I so thoroughly detested. While I still do not like cooked spinach, I love a fresh spinach salad.

Like my experience with spinach, I bet you have had the same kind of experience with vine-ripened tomatoes. An irradiated – store bought – tomato simply has no flavor. There is no comparison to a tomato you have grown in your garden, letting it ripen until about 15 minutes before the meal is served. My wife and I will take about 12 pounds of vine-ripened tomatoes, cut them up with fresh basil, oregano, garlic, and pepper and cook them 9 or 10 hours with three pounds of chicken. There is no restaurant that makes a comparable chicken cacciatore. The difference is the vine-ripened tomatoes.

Perhaps you have had an opportunity to drink a barrel aged – cellar brewed beer or wine. It does not compare with the wine or beer aged in glass on the delivery truck. Or maybe you have been lucky enough to eat some non-pasteurized aged cheese. You know that its taste is fabulous. You will begin to hold in contempt tasteless, pasteurized American cheese – which is nothing more than sanitized, dye-colored protein. My wife often bakes bread in our bread

machine. I like it much better than even the most expensive store bought bread. But I prefer to bake bread from scratch. The taste is deeper and the texture is more commanding. Yes, it takes most of a day to make it. The process requires time, patience, and physical work. But the depth of quality is incomparable to anything on the shelf.

All of these foods require time. The palatability of their offering demands the patience of experience – for ripening, fermenting, and flavoring. Their value is enhanced because they have been graced with hours, days, months, and even years to mature and fulfill the body of their savor.

Likewise, I have tasted many expressions of spirituality, religious affections, and theology. My experience with most contemporary religious expressions is about as satisfying as store bought tomatoes. They may be firm and round and mostly red. But they lack the grace of time, experience, and fermentation. Irradiated spirituality attracts record numbers of people to retreat centers and sells millions of dollars of books and records. And yet the customers are never quite satisfied are they? They move on to the next spiritual fad or flip to Amazon.com to buy the latest book on “fulfillment.”

They turn to Oprah and Dr. Phil for emotional healing. And if that does not work they talk to their doctor about the right medication for depression, general anxiety, and social phobia. (Side effects include dry mouth, diarrhea, nausea, constipation, dizziness, headaches, and sexual dysfunction. Do not take this medication if you have a heart, stomach, liver, kidneys, or lungs.)

Churches are not much better. Religious programming is often a smorgasbord of culinary boredom that never satisfies the hunger of the human soul. An indication of this malnutrition is found in our seminaries where as many as 40% of all graduates will never enter into a religious profession. Why do they spend tens of thousands of dollars on a master's degree in divinity or theology? They are on a spiritual quest that their church cannot satisfy. Churches will raise the entertainment values of their worship but not the depth of their content. The graphics may be state of the art but the plot is so thin you pray for a commercial that will be a little more interesting. The volume is amplified but the message of the music is lost. The communion loaf is white and vitamin enriched. But such wonder bread still sticks to the roof of your mouth and the grape juice is too sweet.

Maturity of body, mind, or soul requires years of work and play, time, energy, and rest. Faith development demands years of experience, success and failure, experimentation and discipline. I have a distant cousin who was so proud of her three year old who ran around in her training panties saying, “Jesus is my Lord and Savior.” Now I have no reservations about a person who professes Jesus as the Christ. But I am not convinced that such a profession of faith can be made without the experience of death and suffering and sacrifice. And I often encounter those whose experiences of death and suffering and sacrifice have led to other conclusions about the lordship of Jesus. Some of these are embittered, but the vast majority are well seasoned with compassion and genuine goodness. As Greg Orr makes so clear in his book, *The Blessing*, we do not understand the meaning of the word until a little blood has been splattered across our faces.

Progressive Christians are often guilty of rushing their children to superficial abstractions about the philosophy and values of life. We want our children to have a reasoned faith at the expense of imagination, fantasy, and poetry. We rush them to adult conclusions and ideals that bear no resemblance to their life experience. We work very hard to shield them from violence, sexual exploitation, and the

madness of television advertising. We refuse to buy them toy guns and we are shocked when our little boy points his finger at us and shouts “bang!”

The fact of the matter is that maturity comes with education, time and age. Our responsibility is to plant the best seeds, constantly hoe to keep out the weeds, water, and fertilize. But our best efforts must finally yield to the vicissitudes of nature. We do all that we can to nurture our children but we must also yield them up to the machinations of peer pressure, culture, and their own determination to chart the course of their own lives. It is often painful and we sometimes lose sleep over the obvious errors they make, hurting themselves and others. Yet, when all is said and done, it is time and experience that will sharpen and hone their souls. They will make up their own minds and their own decisions about the lessons they have learned in life.

Several years ago one of my children was perilously involved with drugs. It was the usual tale of a 14-year-old smoking marijuana, and a few years later trying harder drugs. I do not know the full extent of it, nor do I think I want to know. I tried doing everything I knew how to do, including intervention programs through his school

and therapy. While we were talking with his therapist one day he said, “Dad, you are the one with the problem about all of this. Why don’t you go into therapy?” He said it in that teenaged snotty tone of voice that provokes homicidal ideation in the minds of parents. (My Muslim friends tell me that adolescence is the ultimate jihad.) But I stayed my hand and said as calmly as I could that he was on his own. He would be responsible for his drug use and all of the consequences. It was a hard thing to say and very hard to stand back and watch him risk his life.

After a few years he came home from school and told me that he wanted to join the Oklahoma Army National Guard. I did not know how he could possibly pass the drug test. Even though the application would take several weeks his physical would be within 30 days. His recruiter knew about a concoction that he could drink on the morning of his physical that would mask any drug residue left in his blood stream. Believe it or not, he got through the physical and was off to boot camp that summer. You will be pleased to know that the longer he stayed in boot camp the smarter I got. By graduation I was the best dad that ever walked the face of the earth.

Later on he told me that he realized his drug use and the people associated with it would ruin his future. Joining the Guard was one way to start over as well as earn a college degree. To my knowledge he has never used drugs again. Part of his strategy was to tell his friends that because he was in the Guard he could not use drugs with them and risk his chance to go to college.

As hard as this path was, it was his path. He chose the experiences that marked the way and I am very proud of him. He is a vine-ripened human being who is not only wise to the ways of this world, but also wise to the paths of redemption. And I have learned that I cannot rush people to my own conclusions and goals. I needed to trust my son to apply his heart and mind to life's experiences. I needed to allow the baptism of blood so that he would know the blessing of life. I needed to allow the baptism of blood so that he could know that he is a blessing to life.

Vine-ripened theology begins with the human being and our long, slow, often crooked way of growing our minds and souls. It reminds me of my pumpkin vines. They determine their own course over the summer. My pumpkin vines are not particularly concerned about the boundaries of my garden. They seemed to prefer the lawn,

growing and stretching fifteen or twenty feet into the grass. Mowing is a real challenge. But by fall they produce beautiful fruit that made their way into jack-o'-lanterns.

During this period of terrorism and war we will be tempted to buy irradiated theology, irradiated truth, and irradiated citizenship. Fear tempts us to neat plastic packages of meaning and responsibility. An irradiated life does not require you to think, explore and experiment, or test your life's meaning against your experience.

I do not buy irradiated tomatoes.

I am going to hold out for vine-ripened theology, vine-ripened truth, and vine-ripened citizenship. I am going to hold out for the fruits of my mind, even though I must constantly water and fertilize it, hoe the weeds, break a sweat and get dirty in the process. And like all gardens, vine-ripened theology will be subject to drought, birds, and bugs. Some fruit will be so hidden in the plants that I will not see them as they mature and fall to the ground and rot. Some will be picked by naughty children and splattered against the garage wall or another kid's butt.

Growth in the Christian faith requires time, as much time as you are allotted on this earth. It requires patience, both to learn and

study, and to unlearn the mistaken ideas that we were taught when younger. We live in a culture that is impatient for a faith that is easy to swallow, and preferably only once. We sometimes expect the minister to inspire us, answer every religious challenge, and finally expect nothing of us. There are a lot of churches that promise that kind of faith, along with plenty of feel-good messages and easy listening music. In the end the product is irradiated faith and when people are finally crushed under the wheel of suffering, as every one of us inevitably is, they do not have the depth of hope or courage to bring wholeness to their loss and grief.

I also confess that the older I get the more time I need to cultivate my faith. I need to read more, think more, and pray more. Just like my garden I have to take more time to weed, feed, water, and fertilize. And Kansas is teaching me a whole new way to garden. So if you are looking for an instant gratification sermon I am afraid you have come to the wrong preacher. But if you are looking for a deeply cultivated faith, a faith that grows in richness and nutriment you just might be in the right pew. If you are looking for a faith that is also patient with each person's growth and faith development, you have come to the right church. Through our worship services, special

ministries, and Christian education we will introduce you to the basic tools of faith. We will not hoe for you or weed your garden. That's for you to do. We will tell you the things that we have learned on our faith journey. We will share new seeds and techniques for ripening your faith in God. And if it seems that it takes a long time, many hours of preparation, and hard work, relax. That is part of the ripening.

When I was working on my doctorate at Emory University I had lunch with the chair of my doctoral committee. I was also serving a congregation in north Georgia. I mentioned to Dr. Weber that I was seeking a new appointment from the bishop. He asked me why. I said I had been there five years and it seemed the right time to move on. He shook his head very sadly and said, "Five years is not enough time to be an effective minister." The desert fathers have a saying, "A tree that is often transplanted can bear no fruit."

So, I am learning to trust the ripening of faith and ministry. In the end it will have a flavor the pampered will never know.

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