

I don't want to appear as though I'm late to the party, but when it comes to social media, I'm a little behind the times. I have an account with Facebook, Twitter, and Linked In, it's just that I rarely visit them. But this Summer, I stepped into another dimension of social media, namely, Instagram.

I have known about Instagram for some time and hadn't felt any need to get an account, but at the prompting of my 17 year old niece, I signed up. As soon as my account was active, I began to "follow" my niece, noting immediately that she had 300+ followers but she had only posted 6 times. When I asked her about her infrequent posting, she laid out a well-defined set of Instagram rules:

- rule #1: you've gotta look good. No bad hair days, goofy smiles, and or bad clothing...when in doubt, don't post.
- rule #2: you can't post too many of the same kind of photo. *Uncle Mark, if you've just posted a picture of yourself hiking a trail, you can't post another for a long time.* "Why not?," I asked. *Because you don't want to typecast as that "outdoorsy girl."* Of course...why hadn't I thought of that?
- rule #3: the picture has got to have a "wow" factor. Before you post the picture, you need to ask yourself, "*how many 'likes' is this picture going to generate?*" Better to not post than to post and not get enough "likes". Ideally, you want the picture to look incredibly cool without it appearing like you were trying really hard.

Needless to say, I had a lot to learn from my niece. But as I listened to her rules, I realized that I was learning more about my niece than I was about Instagram. I'm happy to report that I broke most of her Instagram rules with unflattering clothes, too many outdoorsy

pictures, and not nearly enough "wow" factor. There's a good reason why she had 300+ followers and I only have 34.

Now your Facebook page offers a few more details about your life—name, birthdate, home town, relationship status—but you'd be hard pressed to look at my page and come up with statement about who I am and what I'm here for.

Social media plays an enormous role in our society; it provides a platform to show a particular self, or identity, to a virtual world of friends, and then, to invite instant feedback on the self you've presented. When we don't know who we are, we end up trying on identities like clothes, hoping to find the one that will resonate with the maximum amount of people. For many, the question "who am I?" has been replaced with something more dangerous, "who do you want me to be?"

Experts are beginning to see a link between social media and anxiety. People post something on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter and then wait anxiously to see how many comments or "likes" they receive. If the response is lacklustre, the post-er is left to wonder, whether anyone really cares about their life.

Social media has some tremendous upside when it comes to staying in touch with people and communicating information quickly, but, how quickly we can rely on a virtual world of friends to tell us who we are, or, who they want us to be. When we turn to the virtual world to tell us we're okay, that we're smart, beautiful, or likeable, we're in for a rough ride.

Last week, Pastor Mardi wrapped up our Summer Teaching series by addressing the question of whether faith and science are compatible. In certain respects they are compatible and in other respects, science and faith answer very different questions. Science deals exclusively with the material, observable, world. Science can tell us about the composition of our body, how the immune system works, and why some people have brown eyes and others blue. But try as it might, science cannot answer the question I am posing to you today—*who are you and what are you here for?*

Human beings are lost without a sense of identity. Humanity craves meaning—we make it or find it, any way or anywhere we can. Science can't tell us who we are or why we are here, and neither can our friends on Instagram, Facebook, or Twitter. There is only One person who is qualified to answer these kinds of questions—the One who designed us.

We were created for a purpose; we have been designed for fruitfulness. God has led you through experiences, given you skills, talents, and passions, each of which makes you a gift from God to others. When we hold on to these gifts—guarding, protecting, spending them on ourselves—we impoverish the people around us. My life is not my own, and neither is yours—we gave up that right when we decided to follow Jesus. My life, your life, belongs to God, and is to be lived to bring blessing to others.

This morning marks the first of four sermons in a series I've entitled, *Bearing Fruit That Will Last*. Throughout the Fall, we want to invite you to take a look at your life and ask the question, "God, where are you asking me to serve You and others?"

I'm going to be preaching from John 15 this morning, and I'd like to invite you to turn there with me. This is a brilliant text, a timeless text, a text that speaks to us today. If you have ears to hear, then listen to what Jesus would say to you this morning. Jesus is speaking to His inner circle of followers in order to further reveal His identity and purpose.

And what those first followers discovered, what we are meant to discover, is that our identity is bound up with His. In other words, **who we are is connected to who He is.** And more, **what we're here for—life's meaning and purpose—is bound up with what He's doing.**

Allow me to read the text for you, John 15:1-16.

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. 3 You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4 Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

5 "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. 7 If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

9 “As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. 10 If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commands and remain in his love. 11 I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. 12 My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

14 You are my friends if you do what I command. 15 I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master’s business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last”.

For the purposes of my sermon this morning, I want to drill down into one of the core themes in this text, namely, that we have been designed for fruitfulness. Let’s take a closer look at Jesus’ identity statements in vs. 1-2.

1. “I Am the True Vine” (vs. 1)

Every chance Jesus got, He would tell a story or use a metaphor to reveal what God is like. Here, He refers to Himself as the true vine, God the Father as a Gardener, and His followers as branches. And while this might not be a familiar metaphor to us, it certainly was to His original audience. The vine, or vineyard, is one of the most common metaphors in ancient literature.

The Old Testament regularly speaks of Israel as being God’s vineyard¹, however, when this metaphor was applied to Israel, it often drew attention to her *lack of fruitfulness*. Listen to Isaiah 5:1-4:

“I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watchtower in it and cut out a winepress as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. “Now you dwellers in Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?”

Do you hear the heartbreak in God? His people had been unfaithful and unfruitful; they had rebelled against God and despised the calling it had been given. And so, another servant was raised up, One who would be faithful, One who would be fruitful, One who would succeed where Israel had failed—the Lord Jesus Christ. And not only will Jesus be the faithful and fruitful vine, He will ensure that every branch that is connected to Him will bear much fruit, to the glory of God the Father.

2. “My Father is the Gardener” (vs. 2)

Jesus said, *“I am the True Vine and my Father is the gardener. 2 He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”*

¹ c.f. Psalm 80:8-16; Is. 5:1-7; 27:2ff.; Jer. 2:21; 12:10ff; Ezek.15:1-8; 17:1-21; 19:10-14; Hos. 10:1-2.

It is from this verse and those that follow that we arrive at Jesus' own conclusion—when we redefine our life around Jesus, fruitfulness is sure to follow. Jesus is the True Vine, everywhere He goes, He brings life. As Jesus lives in you and you and Him, His abundant life will flow with purpose and power into every crack and crevasse. And Jesus tells us that the Father is a Gardener—He knows just what to do, at just the right time, to make every branch even more fruitful.

Remember—Jesus tells us—we didn't choose Him, He chose us and appointed us to bear fruit that will last. Our confidence lies not in our abilities and expertise, but in the True Vine who possesses life, and in the ability of our Gardener to coax fruitfulness out of us. Every vine, every fruit tree, and every rose bush benefits from a wise gardener.

illus: When I was growing up, my mom took her gardening seriously; her flower beds were more creative, vibrant, and beautiful than any others in the entire neighbourhood. Of all her flowers, mom prized her rose bushes—she loved them so much that every winter she would take a pair of shears and begin to hack away at something that was very much alive.

At first, it appeared as though her activity was careless and random. What I didn't understand at the time was that branches that are left to grow as they please, don't become more fruitful, they become less. The roots do their job and suck up nutrient from the soil, and these nutrients are directed into every branch, those that are alive and bear flowers, as well as those branches that are dead.

As my mom explained what she was doing, I saw noticed that her pruning didn't end with the dead branches, it included the healthy ones as well. It wasn't until she brought me to see another

neighbourhood rose bush that I understood the power of pruning. The gardener had let the rose bush grow as it pleased and as a result it had a wild look about it. It stood at an impressive 8-9 feet tall, sprouting in many directions, but the roses were fewer, smaller, and less vibrant.

Every rose bush benefits from a wise gardener, so too does every vine. Jesus said, "*every branch that does bear fruit [the Father] prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.*" As we follow Him, as we abide in Him, we will bear fruit that lasts. And when we offer ourselves to God—our experiences, skills, talents, and passions—inevitably, the Father will prune our lives to make us even more fruitful. Most pruning involves pain, a cutting or a clearing away to allow for greater growth and fruitfulness.

This morning I want to ask ask you, *are there things in your life that are dead and need to be removed?* It could be almost anything—a habit, an attitude, a behaviour, or a pursuit. I want you to take a moment right now to listen to the voice of Jesus—*are there things in your life that are dead and need to be removed?* **Pause**

Perhaps Jesus brought something to mind, if He did, let me encourage you to do two things: (1) tell someone you trust—a friend, your spouse, a small group leader, or pastor; and (2) ask Jesus how He wants to remove this dead wood—He knows what to do; pruning is His specialty.

But apart from that which is dead, *is there something growing in your life that is healthy but would benefit from further pruning?* Maybe God is at work, pruning one of your relationships—He might be growing your ability to communicate your thoughts, feelings, or

boundaries. Perhaps God is growing your self awareness—you're beginning to see how your words and actions affect the people around you.

Perhaps you are currently using your gifts to serve in a ministry and you are going through some growing pains; the Father might be giving you new clarity, teaching you humility, or asking you to take on more, or less, responsibility. None of us of us ever graduate from pruning—expect it and welcome it as a gift from a Wise Gardener.

Before I conclude my sermon this morning, there's two things I want to share with you—the first is an inside look into your pastor's thoughts, and the second is an invitation.

illus: this Summer, our family holidayed with some old friends from Calgary. On one of the days, we were sitting on the beach, watching our kids swim, and our friends asked how things were going at the church and what it was like to be a pastor. I don't remember how I responded, but I do remember one of their comments—*“it must be really hard to be a pastor, especially being involved in funerals.”*

Strange as it might sound, I had never really thought of it that way. Officiating at funeral is one the greatest privileges there is—pastors are given a precious trust when they are invited to walk with a family at one of their darkest moments. In a small way, and for a brief time, you invited to be a part of the family.

But there is another gift that accompanies every funeral, one for which I am profoundly grateful. You see, I am plagued by the same challenges and concerns that each of you face; I am just as prone to forgetfulness as you are. Life gets busy—marriage, work, bills, piano

recitals and soccer practice—you go to bed each night, wake up the next morning, and do it all over again. Life can get moving so fast that we're simply on auto-pilot, rarely thinking about who we are or what we're hear for.

And then I get the call that someone has died, and the family wants to sit down and talk with me. The gift is the trust that I've been given **and** the clarity that comes every time when I meet with the family. Every time I sit down with a tear-stained family, I think to myself, “One day it will be me—it will be me who has died, and tears will stain the faces of my family. Someone will sit with them, listen to them, and cry with them.”

I've been thinking this week, what if this were the last year of my life? What would remain after I was gone? What would people say about me?

- Mark Allan Peters, born in Surrey, B.C., June 17, 1973, died, North Vancouver, 2016.
- was married to Naomi for 17 years, and father of 2.
- he had half a house, 2 cars, and a crummy cat
- earned two Masters Degrees
- pastored in two churches

What would people say? What would I be remembered for?

Now I know these thoughts sound morbid, but to me they are gift, a reminder that my life is precious, temporary, and fragile. Regularly I pray with the psalmist, *“Lord, remind me how brief my time on earth will be. Remind me that my days are numbered—how fleeting my life is.”* This isn't the prayer of a joyless, fearful heart, but the prayer of a heart that wants to **LIVE** and invest my life in what matters.

I know who I am and what I am here for. I belong to God. I am His to command. I have been designed to bear fruit that will last, fruit that bears witness to Him.

You were created for a purpose; you were designed for fruitfulness. God has led you through experiences, given you skills, talents, and passions, each of which makes you a gift from God to others. But when you hold on to these gifts, you impoverish the people around you. Gifts are meant to be given; your life is meant to be given to God for His purposes in the world.

Apart from God, there is only one thing that will last for eternity—*do you know what it is?* **People.** Are you investing in people? I believe with all my heart that the most important things that we leave behind live on in the people we loved, served, and pointed to Jesus.

Now that I've shared my thoughts, here is the invitation. I'd like invite you to take a long, hard, look at your life and ask the question, "*God, where are you asking me to serve You and others?*" Asking the question is the easy part, it's the follow-through that's more difficult. Commit to God in advance that you will "yes" to the opportunity He puts in front of you.

You might find yourself inviting your neighbour or coworker to come with you to Alpha this Fall. You might say "yes" to God and end up serving in our Childrens' or PreTeen ministry. God might prompt you to lead a small group on Wednesday morning with our Women's Ministry, or on Wednesday night with our High School students. Or you might feel prompted to serve as an usher on Sunday

mornings. An usher can make all the difference in a person's first experience of church.

illus: I can remember the first time I walked into First Alliance Church. I had graduated from Bible School, been hired by the church, and was showing up for my first Sunday. I was feeling really nervous and not sure that I wanted to go in. I didn't really know anyone, it was a huge church, it was my first pastoral job and I was feeling inadequate and overwhelmed—that's when I met Herb.

I must have had that "I don't know if I belong here" look on my face because the moment I stepped into the foyer, Herb made a beeline for me. He had a welcoming smile on his face and he stuck out his hand and introduced himself. "*My name is Herb, what's your name?*" I didn't think to tell him I was the new pastor, I simply said, "*My name is Mark.*"

Then Herb asked if I had ever been to First Alliance before, and when I told him it was my first Sunday, his smile got even bigger. "*Your first Sunday? I'm so glad you're here! You're going to love this church, the people are so friendly you're going to want to come back again and again.*" As he began to show me around, I began to grin from ear to ear—that sense of being overwhelmed quickly vanished, and I began to relish the thought of getting to spend time with people just like Herb.

Ushering was Herb's sweet spot in ministry, and his sweet spot had a profound affect on me. His warm and generous welcome was exactly what I needed to feel like I could belong at the church, and that allowed me to find my sweet spot in serving God and others.

My dear people, we need what God has placed within you—bring your gifts, your passion, and your experiences, and come and be a part of what God is doing in our midst.

Next Sunday, I'll continue in this series and my sermon will be entitled "*Fuelled By A "Higher" Power*". This message will focus on the presence and power of the Holy Spirit—the Spirit calls, equips, gifts, and empowers us to participate in the work of Jesus.

At this time I'd like to invite the worship team to come as I lead you in prayer.

Prayer

Worship

Benediction