

Pastor Kevin Garman

Theme: Excellence/Fruitfulness

Scripture: John 15:1-14

October 18th, 2020

"Increase in Excellence"

Last week we discussed the topic of Extravagant Generosity through our giving and our resources. I shared a story of one of the most generous gifts I have ever received in the form of a pair of dress shoes. We looked at the story of the poor widow to illustrate a sense of service to others through our giving. This week we close this sermon series with the final chapter in the book, *The Five Practices of Fruitful Congregations*, by discussing the theme of Excellence and Fruitfulness, and we look to the Gospel of John and Jesus' depiction of the True Vine as he speaks about the power of love.

At my alma mater, Emory & Henry College, our motto was *Macte Virtute*, which transcribed from the Latin meant, Increase in Excellence. I was not the best student at E&H as learning in grade school had come relatively easy for me as I would take good notes in class and memorize what teachers said for tests and quizzes. For the first time in my life, I had to learn how to study and actually had to read the material we were assigned. This motto and these values I learned shaped me into the man I am today by always reminding me that we must always strive to, "Increase in Excellence."

Increase in Excellence was not something we simply believed in, but it was a shared, lived experience. We held each other accountable as students, faculty, and colleagues. Our excellence was not an individual endeavor, but it was a shared effort in building a more inclusive, loving, equitable community. Every year, the freshman class, and many others, would join together in a community service project for the community at the beginning of every school year. All the resident advisors, orientation leaders, and student leaders would gather to welcome the new students to their new home through fellowship and a service at the chapel. We took time to value the leaders of our country by celebrating the life and legacy of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. by holding various symposiums and lectures during the month of January. However, the most important lesson for me was learning the importance of showing up for things that mattered and creating a better community through my love of my colleagues, friends, and mentors. WE made Emory & Henry College and WE increase in excellence together.

In our Hebrews Bible study this past week, we shared vulnerably and authentically how difficult it is to do that in Covid-19. Each day in Covid seems more exhausting than the days that preceded it that we now refer to as the, "days when things were normal." We shared how we are all relating to this newfound fatigue and responding to it in a day and age of disconnect. It seems as if each new notification on our phones or breaking news bubble on our televisions is talking about some new atrocity or terrible event taking place in our community, nation, and world. Right now, increasing in excellence is just being there with one another and showing up.

Jesus may not use the same words or language as we do today, but he speaks about how our increase in excellence provides the fruits of the Gospel. He uses the analogy of the vine to illustrate this point. I confess, I am not much of a gardener and I definitely do not have a green thumb, but there is something sacred about feeling dirt between your fingers as you watch a seed grow into a beautiful flower, tasty vegetable, or sturdy tree. Jesus reminds us that God continues to shape and form us just as a vinegrower tends to their stalk. God prunes us into our fruitfulness and continues illuminating the goodness within us. There are times in our lives where certain acts, events, words, and people are necessary to helping us bear our fruits. When times like the ones we experience now are trying and difficult, God reminds us, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me" (NRSV John 15:4).

Verses 5-7, at first glance, come off as rather harsh. They say we will be pruned, cast away, and thrown into the fire, but Jesus assures that this is more of a transformation than a damnation as God abides with us in Divine love and grace. "8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love" (NRSV John 15:8-9). Our discipleship bears our fruitfulness and commits us to the legacy of excellence through love and trust in one another. Jesus calls us to abide in God because God loves us so much.

When we doubt our worthiness or when we face times of difficulty and trouble, Jesus reminds us that love is the answer. He says, "12 This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you" (NRSV John 15:12-14).