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BETHANY LUTHERAN CHURCH  
ELKHORN, NEBRASKA  
JUNE 11, 2006  
PASTOR WENDA FRY

1 PASTOR WENDA FRY: I was running down at the Elkhorn  
2 Middle School and I guess the Elkhorn Middle School that is  
3 in Elkhorn is called the Classic, which I didn't realize.

4 I didn't know it was called Elkhorn Classic, and I  
5 thought that was classic. But, anyway, I was running down  
6 there.

7 There is another middle school on 180th, and that's  
8 Elkhorn Ridge, but I was running at the Classic track and I  
9 was coming around and if you have been to that track it has  
10 the bleacher seats there and then there is the stairs that  
11 goes up to the parking lot.

12 And I was just approaching those stairs as I saw a  
13 young man come bounding into the stadium, get on that railing  
14 and slide down the railing. I was really impressed with  
15 that.

16 All of a sudden I heard, "Hi, Pastor Wenda."

17 So I looked over and I thought that must be a  
18 Bethany kid, because I didn't really recognize him.

19 And then I asked him, "Did you just slide down that  
20 whole railing?"

21 "Well, just about," he said.

22 And then I saw his mom come in, Michelle, and that's  
23 when I recognized that this family that was going to be  
24 walking, the mom and the two boys, were one of our Thompson  
25 families.

1           We have about fifteen Thompson families here at  
2 Bethany and this is one of our Thompson families, and I  
3 remember they had the two boys.

4           So I don't know if you know this, but you get a  
5 better workout if you try to talk to people while you are  
6 running, and it's really a chore for me.

7           So I am coming around the corner, I see Michelle, I  
8 go, "Shell, Shell," I'm running.

9           I said, "The boys, what are their names?"

10          She shouts, "Cody and Christian."

11          So I keep running, I get down coming around the  
12 other side and I see the guys down there playing a little bit  
13 of soccer with each other.

14          I said, "Cody, Christian, what grades are you guys  
15 going to be in?"

16          "7th grade," and, "I'm going to be in fifth grade."

17          And I marvelled to myself, because I remember when  
18 Christian was a toddler in this place, and they were tan,  
19 started their summer obviously, and they just looked so  
20 strong, and they're growing up.

21          But I didn't say anything like that, because kids  
22 don't like it when you say stuff like that.

23          And then I think it was the next day, or maybe the  
24 night previous to that, I was on campus and I saw the Svuem  
25 girls, Kylee and Lauren, and one of the Peterson girls,

1 Taylor Peterson, and they just looked huge to me.

2 They are so beautiful and grown up, and I caught  
3 myself, I didn't say, "You guys have really grown," I didn't  
4 say that.

5 I actually got this one right. I said, "You girls  
6 are beautiful. What grade are you going to be in?"

7 And they told me that, but kids don't like it,  
8 grandparents especially, they don't like that, do they, when  
9 you say, "You've grown. My, how you've grown."

10 They don't like that at all. They roll their eyes.  
11 What are they thinking?

12 I suppose, grownups, of course we are growing.  
13 That's what we are supposed to do.

14 But I'm not exactly sure what they're thinking when  
15 we say that, but we marvel at it, and we worry when they  
16 don't grow, that's for sure.

17 And then we know they are supposed to be growing,  
18 but we marvel at it when they do grow.

19 Because living things grow. That's what we are  
20 supposed to do.

21 We are supposed to be alive and fruitful and that's  
22 what God wants us to be.

23 He started in the Book of Genesis, he says be  
24 fruitful. He wants us to bear fruit, to be living beings.

25 Today we are going to talk about growth and I ask

1 you a question, are you growing?

2           Sometimes it's hard to tell, isn't it, because you  
3 are with yourself all the time.

4           If you could be apart like I was, I was apart from  
5 Cody and Christian, I could see them from a distance, not  
6 only on the track, but I had not seen them like together for  
7 a while, and I could really tell that they had grown.

8           But sometimes when we are trying to detect our own  
9 growth it's hard to see, because we are so close to each  
10 other.

11           The same with our spouse maybe, or some of the  
12 members of our family, or maybe some of the members of our  
13 church family, we are so close that we can't really tell if  
14 we are growing or not.

15           But we are supposed to be growing. That's what God  
16 wants us to do, and when we stop growing we die.

17           Growth is what we are called to do as Jesus's  
18 disciples.

19           Many of you have asked me about last weekend when I  
20 was at the synod assembly in Kearney, Nebraska.

21           For those of you who are visiting today, or at  
22 Bethany for the first time, or maybe those of you who have  
23 not heard, I was nominated to be on the ballot for bishop of  
24 the Nebraska Synod.

25           And I was very honored to be a part of that process,

1 and I want to thank all of you for your prayers and your  
2 support of that and your love that was coming at me. Thank  
3 you so much for that.

4 Our beloved bishop, David deFreese, was unanimously  
5 re-elected on the first ballot.

6 I was just simply humbled to be part of that  
7 process.

8 I realized as I was driving back to Omaha with Mark  
9 that it was a beginning of an event for me, that I'm still  
10 working on, I'm still working on the steps to see what God  
11 wants to teach me about it.

12 But one of the things I've learned is that he really  
13 wants me to grow in my leadership as a church leader, and it  
14 really was a step forward for women in the church, and I'm  
15 thankful and humbled that I could be a part of that.

16 Bishop deFreese in his comments after he was  
17 re-elected said this.

18 "I have really grown to be more of a grace-filled  
19 person in the past six years and my prayer life is deeper now  
20 than it ever has been."

21 I thought that was awesome; that our bishop would  
22 point to growth.

23 That was the very first thing he said. "In the past  
24 six years with you, I have grown to be more of a grace-filled  
25 person."

1           That's what we are supposed to do as God's  
2 disciples, is to grow in our faith

3           But sometimes it's hard for us to tell whether we  
4 are growing or not, and maybe we're not even thinking about  
5 that kind of growth, but that's what God wants us to do.

6           Today we are going to talk about growing, and I want  
7 to show you a picture here of a vineyard, and I don't know in  
8 what part of the world.

9           This actually looks a little bit like Nebraska,  
10 that's what I was thinking. It's probably France, right?

11           But, anyway, this is a picture of runaway growth.  
12 If you want to go broke, I read an article in "Wine  
13 Spectator" magazine, if you want to go broke, go into the  
14 wine business, because not only are finances a real  
15 challenge, there are many aspects of growing excellent fruit  
16 and grapes and the weather and the soil, and everything has  
17 to be just right.

18           But one of the aspects of the wine business that is  
19 frequently overlooked is the problem of runaway growth.

20           And this is an excellent picture of it. I'm really  
21 glad that Martha could find that, because it looks like it's  
22 doing well, really.

23           Runaway growth is a problem because it's tricky. It  
24 looks like there is a lot of growth and a lot of green and a  
25 lot of leaves and a lot of shoots, and that could trick the

1 person that is in the wine business, because it looks like  
2 that's a good thing.

3 But it's not. It's runaway growth. And the problem  
4 with runaway growth is that you can't produce top shelf  
5 grapes to make wine with.

6 And the second problem is there is so much growth  
7 there that you can't see the fruit, and that's the problem  
8 with runaway growth.

9 So vines left to themselves, they'll just sprawl  
10 everywhere, and they'll look like they are healthy, but they  
11 are not really.

12 One of our favorite shows that Mark and I like to  
13 watch is "Keeping Up Appearances," the British comedy.

14 We just absolutely love that. It's hilarious. Do  
15 any of you watch that, "Keeping Up Appearances"?

16 It's just hilarious. It's the story of Hyacinth.  
17 The four sisters are Hyacinth, Daisy, they are named after  
18 different flowers, Rose and Violet.

19 She's this matronly woman who is a bit overbearing  
20 and she really cares a lot about outward appearances.

21 She does everything in her power to keep an outward  
22 appearance that seems reserved and ready for anything.

23 And she considers herself well-bred and well  
24 informed of the upper crust of British society.

25 In one episode she asks her neighbor, Elizabeth, to

1 drive her to her sister Daisy's house

2 So they get in the car and they drive over there and  
3 she has her park in front of a really nice house.

4 It's not Daisy's house, but she has her park there  
5 and then she goes up, she marches up to the door, she always  
6 has this flowered hat on, her heels and a dress and a purse,  
7 and she marches up to the door and pretends to ring it and  
8 then she goes around the back pretending as though I'll just  
9 go around the back, because no one is answering the front  
10 door.

11 But really what she's doing is she is going back  
12 there so that she can climb over a six foot brick wall in  
13 order to get to her sister's house.

14 And so she climbs up this brick wall. Of course,  
15 she falls and the hat comes off and her hair is all messed up  
16 and she gets up, brushes herself off, and marches up to  
17 Daisy's house, which is a rundown tenement.

18 She does everything in her power to make sure that  
19 she keeps up the appearance that she is a well-bred English  
20 woman. She's all show and no tell.

21 It's the same problem with this vineyard; all show  
22 and no tell.

23 Just before Jesus left this earth, he knew that his  
24 disciples would need a teaching on not being all show and no  
25 tell.

1           That is why he teaches about pruning, and about  
2 bearing fruit, and about true growth, and not just fruit, but  
3 excellent fruit.

4           He didn't want them to be showy disciples. He  
5 didn't want churches to be showy. He didn't want there to be  
6 showy Christians. He cared about fruit.

7           God has always cared about fruit, from the very  
8 beginning in the Bible, be fruitful and multiply he says to  
9 Adam and Eve.

10           But not just fruit; excellent fruit. A sour grape  
11 may be a grape, but it's still sour. So Jesus cares about  
12 excellent fruit

13           That's why today we are going to talk about runaway  
14 growth.

15           That's a beautiful picture of an apple. Fruit that  
16 is excellent and worth picking.

17           That apple is excellent and worth picking and that  
18 is the kind of fruit that God wants us to bear as his  
19 disciples.

20           So we are going to look at John 15, 1 to 8, but  
21 before we do I want to just take you back to the Old  
22 Testament, so get your Bibles out.

23           We are going to turn to Isaiah, Chapter 5, and the  
24 reason we are is because I'm just going to cite three  
25 examples from scripture that help us to understand why Jesus

1 chose this image of vine, vinegrower, and branches in  
2 John 15.

3 The reason he did is because God has always used the  
4 vine or the vineyard to explain or talk about a healthy  
5 relationship between God and God's people.

6 So in Isaiah, Chapter 5, it's a beautiful image  
7 here, Chapter 5, Verses 1 and 2.

8 I have it on page 647, if that would help you find  
9 it.

10 "Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning  
11 his vineyard. My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile  
12 hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with  
13 choice vines. He built a watchtower in the midst of it and  
14 hewed out a wine vat in it. He expected it to yield grapes,  
15 but it yielded wild grapes."

16 Now turn with me to Jeremiah. That's the next book  
17 over, Jeremiah 2, Verse 21.

18 God cares about the kind of fruit that we bear.  
19 He's looking at his people as though they were a lush  
20 vineyard and had a wine vat in it and when he looked to take  
21 the fruit off the vine, they were wild, out of control.

22 Jeremiah 2:21, there is a great image there. "Yet I  
23 planted you as a choice vine."

24 This is God talking through the prophet Jeremiah. I  
25 planted you, I'm the one, I'm the one that gives the growth.

1 Remember, we read that in First Corinthians, Chapter 3, I'm  
2 the one that causes growth.

3 "Yet I planted you as a choice vine from the purest  
4 stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become like a  
5 wild vine?"

6 God uses the vine, the vineyard, that image,  
7 branches and fruit to speak to his people, give them an  
8 image.

9 Let's turn over to Jeremiah 8:13 and see just one  
10 more image, just to drive that home, how important it is to  
11 bear fruit that is excellent; not just fruit.

12 Jeremiah 8:13, "When I wanted to gather them, says  
13 the Lord, there are no grapes on the vine."

14 Now we've got a bare vine.

15 "Nor figs on the fig tree. Even the leaves are  
16 withered, and what I gave them has passed away from them."

17 That grieves God's heart, when we are not bearing  
18 fruit that is excellent.

19 Yes, a sour grape is a fruit, but it's still sour,  
20 and God wants us to bear excellent fruit, and that's why  
21 Jesus chooses this image in John 15.

22 So if we turn to that again, page 104, "I am the  
23 true vine and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every  
24 branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears  
25 fruit he prunes," that's verses 1 and 2.

1           And then jump down to 5, a reminder again, "I am the  
2 vine, you are the branches."

3           It's so familiar to us, I know many of you are  
4 familiar with these words of Jesus.

5           But what I want you to see today is that he's very  
6 clear about the relationship.

7           It's the perfect relationship between the  
8 vinegrower, the vine, Jesus Christ, and the branches.

9           It's perfect, and God calls us into that perfect  
10 relationship and Jesus reminds his disciples of that, because  
11 he wants us to know that that perfect relationship is given  
12 to us for the sole purpose of producing fruit.

13           And that is why runaway growth is such a problem.  
14 That's why you can't have overgrown vines with a lot of  
15 leaves.

16           You can't have too many commitments, disciples. You  
17 can't be underconnected to your loved ones, your family, your  
18 friends, your neighbors.

19           You can't have a lot of sprawling growth, extra  
20 commitments, because fruit is important to God.

21           And if we are running here and there and we are  
22 overcommitted and underconnected, as most Americans are, and  
23 many Christians, then the world can't see the fruit, because  
24 it's hidden.

25           You know what Jesus says about fruit that is under a

1 bushel basket. He doesn't like it.

2 Don't keep it hidden under a bushel basket. Don't  
3 keep your beautiful apples hidden under a bushel basket.

4 Runaway growth is a problem, and sometimes in our  
5 lives, not just as individuals, our overcommitments, but  
6 sometimes we do this as a church, and our overcommitments, or  
7 our particular obsession, if you will, with non-essential  
8 things in the church.

9 I was parked up at the light up here, the one by  
10 St. Pat's. I was going to go forward and then they have to  
11 turn left, they can't go forward, but every now and then  
12 you'll see that. It's interesting, isn't it?

13 But I'm sitting there, I think it was Friday or  
14 something, and I look over and there's this big huge white  
15 truck, just huge, and on the right-hand bumper sticker it  
16 says, "Don't like Jesus? Then go to hell."

17 I was like "whoa."

18 I crept up a little bit to see like if I could get a  
19 clue maybe, just to see like what kind of a person would be  
20 putting that on their bumper sticker, and I wasn't helped at  
21 all. I looked and there wasn't anything else I got. I tried  
22 to work it out.

23 But that's amazing. I don't know if that guy is  
24 frustrated with Christians not being God's disciples in the  
25 world, or people not getting it, not wanting to know Jesus,

1 but I love Jesus, and I know I'm like many of you, but I'm  
2 thinking if someone drives up that doesn't know or love Jesus  
3 and they see that -- whoa.

4 This is what I mean about if we're overcommitted, or  
5 we have got our own agenda going in the church, or as a  
6 disciple, the world is not going to see the lush fruit, and  
7 God cares about fruit. He cares a lot about fruit.

8 We are under the watchful eye of the world. They  
9 are watching us. They are wondering if our lives have  
10 meaning.

11 That just does not help. Don't like Jesus? For  
12 those who do like him, oh, don't put that on there.

13 We have a bad enough reputation in this world. They  
14 are not seeing the lush fruit.

15 When it's about our agendas, and it's about  
16 non-essential issues, we are hiding the fruit that we are  
17 supposed to be producing.

18 I haven't seen you for a couple weeks. Two weekends  
19 ago I was preaching at a church in Omaha, and it was going to  
20 be a traditional Lutheran service, which I really enjoy  
21 those.

22 So I had my robe and my cross and I had talked to  
23 the music minister before and I said, "Now, which service are  
24 we going to do?"

25 And she said, "Well, we know the "With One Voice"

1     hymnal."

2             That's this blue one. We have a few of them out  
3     there in the pew pockets, but it's this one.

4             I said, "I love that. I just love the songs in  
5     that, but we don't do that at Bethany. We don't do that at  
6     our liturgical service, we don't do "With One Voice", it  
7     would be great, I would like to experience that."

8             She said, "Fine, then. We will do setting one out  
9     of that."

10            So I get there and the assistant to the pastor  
11     handed me a bulletin and I said, "I've got one."

12            She goes, "I'll get you another one."

13            So now I have two bulletins, and as soon as I opened  
14     it up papers fell out of it, so then I am clutching those, I  
15     have the bulletins with all these papers in it, I have two.

16            And then I had my Bible with my notes in it, which  
17     is really all I can handle, to tell you the truth.

18            But then I had this "With One Voice" hymnal, and  
19     then I also had the leader guide that goes with this, and I  
20     was going to be the leader, so I thought I better take that.

21            So I had the leader guide, I had the "With One  
22     Voice", I had my Bible, and I had two bulletins full of  
23     papers.

24            And I think I was doing okay until I got to the  
25     passing of the peace, and I wasn't sure if they did it,

1 because we do it at the front of the service, when you greet  
2 each other, that's when we pass the Lord's peace, because the  
3 Christ in you meets the Christ in me, and that's the peace.

4 So I picked up one of my bulletins and I have the  
5 hymnal and I was walking and all of a sudden I found myself  
6 completely sprawled in front of the congregation with my  
7 microphone on.

8 I missed three steps and the microphone was on. I  
9 was so glad that I didn't say anything.

10 (Laughter)

11 Because I'm from Montana, so some words are more  
12 acceptable than others.

13 But, anyway, I jumped right up, because I could see  
14 a few of the older people in the congregation clutching their  
15 hearts.

16 So I figured I needed to jump right up, and I did,  
17 and I was a bit discombobulated and I went and sat down over  
18 at the pastor's chair and I started to collect myself and I  
19 thought, okay, are they busy?

20 Because if they are busy I can relax and, Lord,  
21 would you please take care of my body, because I was  
22 completely shaken, because I missed all the steps, and you  
23 know how that feeling is when people are staring at you?

24 So I looked up from my prayer about healing and I  
25 saw right here in the front there were four elderly gentlemen

1 waiting for me to give them the plates.

2 We don't do that here, so I try to get up, I got  
3 over here, the plates were over here, and I came over there  
4 and I took one look at those steps and I said to myself, "I'm  
5 not going there."

6 So I go like that, because I didn't need that again,  
7 and then I felt bad because one of the elderly gentleman just  
8 about fell down.

9 But here is the thing. When I was shaking people's  
10 hands afterwards, five people told me, "Pastor, you're not  
11 the first person that has happened to," like that's supposed  
12 to comfort me.

13 (Laughter)

14 But as I drove off, dreaming of ice bags when I got  
15 home, I thought to myself, that must be what it's like for  
16 people who don't know the layout of the church, they don't  
17 know the language, it's embarrassing to fall like that.

18 And I just got to thinking how embarrassed and  
19 sensitive people might feel when they come into the church  
20 and they fall in a way.

21 They don't know where to go next, or what to do, and  
22 no one greets them, and we've got lush, lush fruit, the Good  
23 News of Jesus Christ.

24 God cares about fruit and about sharing that fruit  
25 and we need to be careful and check our vital signs as a

1 church and as disciples and we need to wonder together, are  
2 we hiding behind non-essential things?

3 Are we overcommitted and underconnected to family,  
4 friends, neighbors?

5 That's where the pruning comes in. Pruning is  
6 important, because God established the church, and there is a  
7 lot of nonsense that goes on in the church so that the fruit  
8 doesn't get seen by the world.

9 And that's where the pruning comes in. That's why  
10 Jesus talks about pruning so much.

11 Pruning is not about discipline or punishment; it's  
12 just good gardening.

13 I'm a bit of a novice gardener, but I had these ivy  
14 plants last year and I got them as a little baby plant and  
15 then they were sprawling everywhere at the end of the summer  
16 and I thought those look great.

17 I was proud of that, my cultivating of that, so I  
18 brought them inside for the winter

19 And I wrapped them around this pot and wrapped them  
20 around that pot and they sat on my counter top and it was  
21 like fresh for the winter, because it's not the growing  
22 season.

23 Along about March or April the leaves started  
24 turning brown and falling off.

25 I thought maybe I'm cooking too much. I better cut

1 back.

2 (Laughter)

3 But actually what I did was I repotted them, because  
4 I thought maybe that's the problem.

5 So I gave them some food and stuff and I put them up  
6 and wrapped them around again and a couple days later they  
7 just kept falling off and they were yellow and brown.

8 I took them outside. When it got to be the first  
9 spring rain, I thought God's water will be perfect for those  
10 things, and they kept falling off.

11 So my good friend comes over and I go, "Look at  
12 these things."

13 She goes, "Cut them back."

14 "I don't want to cut back what I've grown."

15 She said, "Cut them back."

16 Look at this picture. Can you see the new growth on  
17 it? Isn't it beautiful? They are looking great.

18 I'm a novice gardener, but it's just good gardening  
19 to cut it back, and God knows that.

20 There is a quote from Ruth Wilkinson from a book  
21 called "Secrets of the Vine".

22 Grapes need pruning and so do Christians. Pruning  
23 will intensify as God's shears cut closer to the core of who  
24 you are. If you don't apply Jesus's vineyard teachings  
25 you'll never experience the abundant life you long for.

1 There is simply no other way. It is not about God  
2 disciplining you, or God punishing you; it's just good  
3 gardening."

4 So I leave you with the question, how are you doing?  
5 Is the fruit that you are bearing, is it lush? Is it  
6 healthy?

7 Are you clinging to the vine, or are you  
8 overcommitted and underconnected?

9 Because, remember what the word says today, apart  
10 from me you can't do anything.

11 So stay close, that's what it means, abide in me,  
12 stay close to me, stay really close to me, because when you  
13 stay close to me you will be bear truth, fruit that lasts.  
14 Not just fruit; excellent fruit.

15 We were just fed not too long ago with juicy sap, if  
16 you will.

17 Christ is the vine with the branches, his lifeblood,  
18 in other words, is like juicy sap that goes into the furthest  
19 branches and gives those branches suppleness, food, strength,  
20 love, forgiveness.

21 We've got the vine in us today. It's the juicy sap  
22 of his love.

23 And the question I want to leave you with today is  
24 will you allow that juicy sap to keep you supple enough to  
25 draw near to the cutting shears, if that's what you need?

1           Or to share that fruit with the world that is  
2 driving by out there, or walking by.

3           Will you allow God to prune you so that that world  
4 that he came to save can see the lush fruit that we are to  
5 produce as his disciples?

6           Let's pray. Thank you, God. Thank you for your  
7 word today and for cleansing us with your word and with that  
8 juicy sap from your holy lifeblood poured out, poured out for  
9 the church; poured out so that the world will know by our  
10 love that we are your disciples.

11           Lord, help us to remember that you are just a really  
12 good gardener and that when you prune us back it's just  
13 because you want us to produce more fruit, fruit that is  
14 excellent and worth picking.

15           So bless the pruning and bless the producing, the  
16 planting and the watering today.

17           Lord, you are gardener and we love to be tended by  
18 your loving hand. Thank you. In your name. Amen.

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