May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing to you, O LORD, my rock and my redeemer. Amen.

Some branches produce fruit and are pruned, cared for and nurtured. Some branches do not produce fruit and are removed, thrown away and burned.

We are a people of productivity. It is, for the most part, the standard by how we live and the measure of our success. It is built into our lives everywhere. Productivity is the basis of our economic system. Those who produce are rewarded and get more. Those who do not produce are thrown out. Within our educational system the students who do well and produce are recognized and supported while those who do not produce get lost in the system. Professors know well the saying, “Publish or perish.” Careers and promotions are based on productivity. Productivity at some level… is at the core of the debates around poverty, welfare, healthcare, and the elderly. “They” usually do not produce… and our care of and for them, often reflects what we think of that.

We have been convinced that productivity is the goal and only the fittest survive. I wonder if that isn’t how many of us live our spiritual lives. How many of us have been told, in some form or fashion, or come to believe that pruned branches go to heaven and removed branches go to hell? Pruned branches produced so they are rewarded while non-productive branches are punished.

If we are not careful we’ll get stuck categorizing ourselves and one another into fruit bearing or non-fruit bearing branches. There is, however, a deeper issue than the production of fruit. Productivity does not usually create deep abiding and intimate relationships. It creates transactions. Jesus is not talking about or demanding productivity. He wants and offers connectivity, relationship, and intimacy.

Fruit or the lack thereof is a manifestation of our interior life and health. It describes and reveals whether we are living connected or disconnected lives. Fruit production is the natural consequence of staying connected. You can see that in long-term friendships, marriages, community loyalty. We do not choose whether or not we produce fruit. We do, however, choose where we abide and how we stay connected.

You know how that is. Sometimes we lose touch with a particular person. We no longer know where he or she is, what she is doing, or what is happening in her life. One day we run into him or her. It’s a bit awkward. No one is sure what to say. There’s not much to talk about. There was no deep abiding presence, the connection is lost, and it seems as, if what was has been thrown away. Other people we run into after five or ten years and the conversation immediately picks up where we left off those many years ago. Even though we were apart we never left each other. There was and remains a connection and mutual abiding that time, distance, and the circumstances of life cannot sever.

“What fruit am I producing?” “How much?” “Is it an acceptable quality?” Those are good questions if we understand and ask them diagnostically, as questions not about the quantity of our lives but the quality of our lives. That’s what Jesus is after. That is the deeper question he is asking. It is the invitation to join the conversation, jump into the game, to participate, and to live fully alive. That only happens when the life, the love, and the goodness and holiness of Christ flow in us. We become an extension of and manifest his life, love, and holiness.

It is a relationship of union, even as a branch is united to the vine. We live our lives as one. This is not just about relationship with Jesus; it affects and is the basis for our relationships with one another. Love for Jesus, one another, and ourselves become one love. We soon discover we are living one life and the fruit of that life and love is abundant, overflowing, and Father glorifying. Amen.