Last week, for several days, Rupert Murdoch was in the news. The media magnate was under review by Britain’s Culture, Media and Sport committee for his role in the phone hacking scandal of a few years ago. The question was: who was responsible for the unethical and morally repugnant methods that were used to get lurid tabloid stories? It wasn’t just a matter of legality: it was the moral framework that made people think their jobs required certain actions. One British MP said of Murdoch: “More than any individual alive, he is to blame. Morally, the deeds are his. He paid the piper and he called the tune…. It is his company, his culture, his people, his business, his failures…. the price of profits and his power.” All this made me wonder: who is responsible for a culture of bad behavior – or for a culture of virtuous behavior, for that matter? What creates culture? It would be nice if we could always point to one person, one leader and name the root of the problem (or the success). But culture is more complicated than that.

Long ago, the prophet Isaiah spoke for God, and expressed judgment on the Kingdom of Israel and the people of Judah. Rather than say that there was a pervasive culture of injustice and violence, Isaiah sings a song about a vineyard. This was a vineyard with many advantages: well-planted, well-tended, with fertile soil and a choice location. But for some reason the expected outcome - the expected culture resulting from God’s care, the fruit of the vineyard - was wild and useless. We do not get the sense that this was the fault of one leader, but of an acceptance of grasping greed on all levels of society. The ties of covenant between God and people were broken. The wild vineyard would be left to fend for itself.

When Jesus’ words in John’s Gospel were written, those images from the Hebrew Scriptures were still vivid in the minds of the people. “My Father is the vinegrower,” says Jesus, and we remember that God offers care and tending to the faithful. Jesus claims the role of the new vine, the true vine, planted by God to bring a new fruitfulness to the community. Rooted firmly in God’s love, Jesus’ vine branches into those who listen to the word. God also offers pruning, or cleansing through the Word. All this has its purpose: discipleship, love, joy, fruit. Isaiah sings a song for his beloved about his vineyard; Jesus sings a song to us about life rooted in the same God, branching from the love expressed by Jesus’ words and Jesus’ life. “Abide in me, abide in my love,” says Jesus: stay by me, draw your nourishment from me, tap into my presence to display the fruit of the Spirit.

Speaking of grapes, and vineyards and wine, there is a French word, terroir, that may be useful here. It refers to that special taste due to unique surroundings: the soil, the orientation to the sun, the slope of the land, the region and the hands that brought it to fruition. There is no real English equivalent for terroir, and there are a multitude of complex factors: even the history of the terrain and how the soil has been worked down the centuries come into play. Terrior suggests that a good wine has “somewhereness”: that the fruit is particular to the plant. In the world of fine wines, the exact location and terroir make the difference between claiming an appellation controlee or settling for being a mere vin du table. A church’s self reflection may be an examination of its terroir: our spiritual soil, our devotional solar orientation, the shape of our moral landscape, the cultivation of our sense of mission.
So there are two things that I take from our Scriptures readings today. One is that we are given what we need to thrive. Whether we take the Old Testament Song of the Vineyard, or the Gospel image of the True Vine, we can claim this: we have roots, there is One who tends us, we are well-placed for fruitfulness. But this opportunity to thrive demands human response. In ancient Hebrew terms, this was the meaning of divine covenant. In the Gospel of John, it is called abiding in Christ’s love. The glowing sun of God grace is shining down. All we have to do is turn our faces in that direction: to be heliotropic plants, responding to grace with our behavior.

But the other thing I ponder is: this quality of terroir in our vineyard. Rooted in God’s grace, branching out from the love of Jesus, leaves tending toward that sunlight: all these things we share with other churches, with other people of faith. But the truth is: we are planted here, we are planted now, in the soil of the Upper Valley, in a year of joy and tragedy and potential. One can read the terroir of a human community in many different ways: through history, traditions, the arts, sociology. But mostly we read it in human beings – how we speak, what stories we tell, who we love, our core values, our motivations, our sense of what is necessary and good. How we live, our culture, produces fruit. And so I wonder, what is the fruit borne by the Norwich Congregational Church? What particular expression of the abiding in God’s love is shown here?

As part of that question, this self-reflective pondering about fruit, I see one more gardening metaphor to exploit. “God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Pruning is a necessary part of our story, a necessary part of our relationship with God’s work. Some pruning is determined by the same terroir that gives us our identity. For instance, we are not an inner city church. We should not pretend that we are: our particular fruitfulness does not lie in that kind of ministry. We are not living in a strongly church-going culture, as is the culture in the Southern United States. We should not pretend that we do live there: our particular fruitfulness does not operate in that setting. By recognizing where we are placed, we can work with God to prune away unhelpful expectations and strengthen what remains.

We will not get any Committee on Culture investigating whether we have done wrongly or rightly in our behavior. No official is going to pass judgment on our leadership about legalities or a culture of dishonesty. No, this is our own work: naming our roots, naming our core values, naming our unified expressions of those values, naming our successes and failures. We do this naming in meetings and in retreats, in cottage meetings and over pot lucks. But maybe much of our naming is not done verbally, not done with words, but with actions. We abide with Christ when we visit someone to cheer them up, when we reach out to people of other faiths, when we take a stand on issues of injustice, when we open these doors at important times in town life, and maybe even when we tend our own little plot of earth in the garden next to the church.

One more thought on the Gospel passage. In John’s Gospel, there is no story of the meal of the last supper, no words of institution for our sacrament of communion. Instead, we get oblique references from Jesus about remaining in communion with God and with one another. These “I am” statements are peculiar to this Gospel. Earlier in John’s account, Jesus says, “I am the bread of life” and “I am the bread that came down from heaven.” And now he speaks about vines and fruit, and “abiding in the vine” to receive nourishment. So, I pray, that as we taste the fruit of the vine today, that we will be nourished and connected and inspired; that the small green shoots and tendrils of our faith will turn towards the sun; and that we will be fruitful, in our own Norwichtian, idiosyncratic way; that our terroir will be revealed as a culture for good, and a gift to the community. Amen.