

## **May 2, 2021 (Focus: John 15:1-8; Fifth Sunday of Easter) Pruning Season**

Too often I think people hear today's passage and they focus on the pruning part, and they go to that place where God has the naughty and nice list like some divine Santa Clause, and he is ready to remove, that is smite, those who aren't pulling their own weight, or even are nonbelievers. There is such a rush by some to get to the punishment/judgment interpretation of the gospel, that they trample on the life giving, life affirming aspects of these parables Jesus offers us.

But for a moment, let's talk about that pruning bit. Yes, we wonder sometimes in our struggles: are those divine pruning shears coming for me? Have I done enough to bypass the chop this pruning season? We get so wrapped up in our judgment version of God made in human form that we forget what Jesus showed us about God's pruning season.

Jesus didn't prune away his disciples when they constantly didn't quite get his teachings yet. Jesus didn't remove Peter from the vine when Peter denied him not once but three times. Jesus didn't remove the disciples after they doubted the women's account of the empty tomb and the resurrection he promised them. Jesus didn't bring out the pruning shears when Thomas doubted that he rose and had the audacity to ask to see the wounds on Jesus' hands and feet. Jesus showed us that God is always looking for the fruit we will bear, which we were created to bear; God is an extra cautious pruner, more cautious than any of us would be as pruners. One might say God is a prodigal non-pruner.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Again Jesus takes his example, his parable from nature, in part because those who first heard them from him would understand such imagery. But maybe he also chose such imagery because nature says something about us, because we are part of nature. Nature is diverse, and such diversity is blessing. In nature there is light and shadow, as there is with us. In nature we see examples of perfection and imperfection, as in us.

In nature, we find vines, and the branches that come off of such vines are part of it. The branches are dependent on the vine, through which nourishment comes for existence and growth of the branches. The branches cannot exist without the vine.

As nature shows us, without the branches, the vine is not fruitful. The vine depends on the branches to help it live out its mission to produce and be fruitful. But in the same vein, the vine and the branches both rely on the roots, the good earth, the sun, and the rain. As we, the branches, and Jesus, the vine, rely on God to provide the foundation upon which we grow and to provide the air and rain and nutrients with which we grow and are fruitful.

I am the vine, you are the branches, Jesus tells us. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. We just enjoyed the fruit of the vine in our celebration of the Lord's Supper, where we are invited to share of the cup and remember the one who offers us not just fruit of the vine, but living waters and a shared cup of covenant and forgiveness. God's bounty feeding us body and spirit, so that we may be fruitful.

So the branches and vine rely on each other, are in vital union with one another to produce the fruitfulness they are created to produce, relying on the roots, the good earth, the sun, and the rain. And yes, the pruning. How know what to prune; church dying or just in need of some pruning to spur new growth? We've done it before, never been easy to discern where the pruning is needed. Or maybe more accurate to say that it is never fully agreed where pruning needed. Change of hymnal...add accessibility...ONA...support marriage equality...welcoming to autism, dementia,...pruned the endowment fund for solar panels, LED lights,...fear of trying new ways (prune the idea that people will just walk into the door on Sundays, come up to us and say, hey, can I be on that committee,...more fruit that the church is challenged to produce – not just acceptance but welcoming, how treat immigrants, poor, other ethnicities and colors and preferences and sexual identity. How treat planet. Holy experiments will bear fruit if do because we are trying to live out the radical expansive life-sustaining love of God in Jesus Christ. That is the root, that is the good soil the produces the fruit.

Pruning won't happen, and won't produce new fruit, if we don't trust in the mutuality of branch, vine, roots, good earth. Us and Jesus and God, in covenant, a vital union through which all creation is blessed.

## John 15:1–8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown in the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Gracious and loving God, before we partake at this table of grace, we offer up the prayers of our hearts, hearts which shine the light of your love to all those in need in body, mind, and spirit, including....

Bless them with your healing touch, your compassion, your steadfast care.

Bless us as we come to the table, bringing all our concerns and joys, all our struggles and triumphs, all our doubts and despairs and worries, all our hopes and dreams. We sense some light breaking forth into the shadows of this pandemic, but we also know if we let our guard down too soon we may contribute to more suffering, but we struggle with patience and understanding and restraint. We want to gather and reconnect and hug. We want things to be normal, whatever that may mean. But yet we also recognize in the old normal that for many normal was about discrimination and danger, perils and persecution, languishing, not love. So yes, we bring to this table our usual bundle of mixed emotions. Yet you always welcome us, as we are, and offer us a seat, rest, and refreshment body and soul, and for this we are truly grateful.

And so we gather again at the table, and we take a moment of silent prayer and meditation to collect ourselves and to feel more deeply that you O God are present with us...

Centered in this moment, we recall that night so long ago when Jesus also gathered with his disciples, ....

Come holy Spirit come. Bless this bread, and bless this fruit of the vine. And bless all of us in our eating and our drinking at this table. ... Bless us as we pray in the words Jesus gave us, Our Father, ... Amen.