

A Time to Prune

A sermon preached by the Rev. Canon Myrick T. Cross at Christ Church Cathedral, Cincinnati, Ohio, on Sunday, May 10, 2009.

"To the members of Christ's body, to the branches of the vine, to the Church in faith assembled, to our midst as gift and sign: Come, Holy Spirit, come."
(Verse 2 of Hymn #513, *Bridegroom*)

God the Gardener. I have often thought how appropriate today's gospel reading about the vine and the branches is for this season. Everywhere you go, and not just to nurseries and greenhouses --- to Lowe's, Home Depot, Kroger's, and even some pharmacies and convenience stores --- there are colorful displays of annual flats and hanging baskets tantalizing those of us who have a weakness for plants and flowers. It feels so good to finally get out there and begin trying to exert control over the Garden of Eden again.

The symphony of lawn mowers in our neighborhood each evening, and especially on the weekends, lets me know all those stress-laden, frustrated P+G junior executive-types are getting psychologically healthy again.... cutting those yards into shape, just the way they want them. I am amazed at the elaborate designs people mow into their lawns: stripes, checkerboards, and soon I expect to see polka dots! This yard work provides near-instant gratification that we seldom experience in our jobs as people and product managers.

I was thinking about the story of Jesus' teaching to his followers not long before his death. He was trying to communicate how life after death could be and the eternal nature of his relationship with us who accept the offer of new life.

In the preceding fourteenth chapter of John's gospel, he had said, "If you love me you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth... You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you." (14.15-17)

"Those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and we will come to them and make our home with them." (14.23)

Jesus wants to live with us! He wants to move in! God seeks an intimate, lasting relationship with us. The disciples had fallen in love with Jesus, and he was trying to explain how their relationship was strong, resilient, dynamic, and would last forever. Probably they weren't getting it, even though he tried to say it in different ways during his final time with them. It was a formula for staying connected.

Several years ago I was working with our Public Relations Committee on a research project. Some of you may remember it. We hired a company to find a representative sampling of non-church goers in the greater urban Cincinnati area to participate in a semi-scientific study of what people are looking for in a church. We actually paid people to come to the Cathedral and then to participate in structured focus groups during which a professional asked them to discuss key questions we had posed.

One important finding of the study was that most people are looking to be "connected" within a community of faith. For many, there had been a disconnect somewhere in their journeys. Based on this, some of our advertising says, "*Connect downtown.*" The challenge facing us now is to ask ourselves, "How can we foster an environment here at the Cathedral that welcomes and invites strangers and newcomers to get connected?" And, "What are the barriers for strangers to getting connected to Cathedral life?"

God wants to be connected to us. Jesus plead with his friends, "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." What does it mean to "abide" in Jesus? Abide may mean to dwell, to stay with, to remain in tact.

Vineyards and wine-making in the Middle East were common and with typical Jesus pedagogy, he used a poignant analogy. I am told that vineyard keepers prune more than half the grape vine each year in producing quality wine.

Our relationship with Jesus is not a static one. By nature of the resurrection, it is filled with mystery, surprise, unpredictability, pain and fear, as well as unbridled joy. Our love affair mandates that we change like yeast and grow like well-watered, sun-drenched germinating seeds, and ultimately bear fruit. The Holy Spirit which enables this process cannot be put in a box, and neither can our lives if they are to be connected to the source.

An authentic connection to Jesus implies spiritual discipline and sacrifice. Jesus likened it to pruning. Pruning eliminates distractions from maximum fruit production. Pruning involves short-term sacrifice for long-term growth.

Can you visualize our working model here? We have Jesus as the main vine--- tough, large circumference, almost tree-like. Then all of us are various size branches growing out of the main vine all the way along, firmly connected. Then there is the fruit --- the final product ---in lush hanging clusters off the branch.

We can go to the fifth chapter of Galatians (5.22ff) for a closer look at the fruit. It is not the models and products of material or economic success our culture defines. Those may even be suckers for the Gardener's shears.

The fruit of the Spirit is "...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit....Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ."

What pruning could increase this kind of fruit in our faith community? Do you ever wonder if God the Gardener is pruning you, or do you ever find yourself in a circumstance presenting an opportunity to be pruned? I thoroughly enjoyed pruning the tulip tree in my backyard last week, but I hate to be pruned myself!

Losing a job early in my initial professional career was devastating. Being sent with my beautiful young family from pastoral Maine to the threatening wilderness of New York

City shook my confidence and threatened my relationships. Taken totally off guard by the birth of a Down Syndrome daughter sent me reeling. And most recently, losing the love of my life as I had known her to a life-threatening stroke, has turned my life upside down. And how has your garden grown?

Henri Nouwen, the Dutch theologian whose own depressed life in Ivy League academia was saved by being led by the Spirit to become chaplain at the Daybreak community for the mentally retarded in Toronto, wrote about "The Discipline of Gratitude" that appears in the current issue of Weavings magazine (46 Weavings XXIV: 3).

Gratitude is not a simple emotion or an obvious attitude. It is a difficult discipline to constantly reclaim my whole past as the concrete way in which God has led me to this moment and is sending me into the future. It is hard because it challenges me to face the painful moments--- experiences of rejection and abandonment, feelings of loss and failure --- and gradually to discover in them the pruning hands of God purifying my heart for deeper love, stronger hope, and broader faith.

Jesus says to his disciples that although they are as intimately related to him as branches are to the vine, they still need to be pruned in order to bear more fruit.

Pruning means cutting, reshaping, removing what diminishes vitality. When we look at a pruned vineyard, we can hardly believe it will bear fruit. But when harvest time comes we realize that the pruning enabled the vine to concentrate its energy and produce more grapes than it could have had it remained unpruned.

Grateful people are those who can celebrate even the pains of life because they trust that when harvest time comes the fruit will show that the pruning was not punishment but purification.

....When our gratitude for the past is only partial, our hope for a new future can never be full.

A reprise of the hymn we just sang:

*"When our hearts are wintry, grieving, or in pain,
thy touch can call us back to life again
fields of our hearts that dead and bare have been
Love is come again like wheat that springeth green."
(Verse 4 of Hymn #204, "Now the green blade riseth")
Amen.*