

### **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 [pruned] 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 into 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.’

### **“Pruned, Picked and Pressed”**

Jesus tells his followers to put their trust in the Vine and the Vinegrower. That makes God the official Pruner. Yet knowing God is behind the pruning doesn’t set my mind at ease! Cuts hurt. Who wants to be pruned and snipped away at, even if it means more fruit in due season for pies, tarts, jams and all things sweet?

God is the Vinedresser. I started wondering this week if much of what we consider painful pruning isn’t God nipping away at the ties that bind us. You know, the things we cling to even though they are toxic. The distorted relationships that keep us from moving forward. Habits we love that are bad for our psyche and our souls. Clip, clip..clip, clip. The Pruner cuts away at things that we continue to do, but hate. Things in our lives such as Paul confessed when he said, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” (Romans 7:15) When God removes the thing we “hate,” yet repeatedly do, an empty space is left which is open to new, lively growth.

The Vinegrower is engaged in one particular Greek verb throughout our passage which is translated both “to prune” and “to cleanse” in the NRSV. The intent of either is the same. Pruning vine branches involves cutting them back to the bare stem. There is not much of a difference between pruning and removing branches. Maybe they are cut away, maybe they are yanked off. No matter which way they go, our passage makes it clear we are all being worked on by God. We are both “branch” and “branches”. Don’t get hung up on being part of a branch that is thrown away! The passage assumes the understanding that those branches are only one part of us, the whole of which God cherishes and loves.

Jesus proclaimed his followers are already pruned because we have heard the word of God in him. Then he goes on to say we must be constantly pruned to prepare us for the continual bearing of fruit. Growing up in the Phoenix metropolitan area there was little opportunity for me to witness the seasons of a vineyard. Now since I’ve lived in the Fingerlakes wine region through a fall and spring this passage makes more sense to me! Every fall, if we are lucky, we are witness to lush branch-filled, grape-filled vines in vineyards. You can hardly see the vine for the branches shoot out from those tiny wires, daring to grow an abundance of grapes despite the challenge of birds, animals, lack of water and scorching sun. The fruit is harvested and enjoyed. In the early spring, all those branches are pruned away—the root of the vine is left bare. Naked to the world, it awaits the growth of its branches to fulfill its mission; bearing fruit.

Jesus is the vine, God is the vine-grower and we are the branches. We tend to hear “you” and think Jesus was addressing “me” as an individual. Well, in this passage the “you” is plural. We have already been pruned by the word Jesus has spoken to his

community. We are told “abide in me as I abide in you” plural. All this abiding talk binds the community of believers together through their source, the great Vine. The community is to be alive with action just as its source is. Jesus gave us both gift and task. God chose to abide with us always, a gift of grace that empowers us to bear fruit. This gift enables us to place our faith in God no matter what situation we are in. There are no conditions to the grace of Jesus abiding in us, but there is a commission, for the Gardener is constantly at work on us branches.

Does pruning always mean a drastic cutting though? Could pruning mean an awakening of our senses to the knowledge that God is with us always? What about a little revelatory snip-snip here and there by the careful gardener? Willa Cather wrote in *Death Comes for the Archbishop*,

“The miracles of the church seem to me to rest not so much upon faces or voices or healing power coming suddenly near to us from afar off, but upon our perceptions being made finer, so that for a moment our eyes can see and our ears can hear what is there about us always.”

In the life of faith we grow to discern that Jesus abides with us in the most peculiar places! He enables us to follow his works of love.

The truth of our connectedness to one another through Jesus and to the word he proclaimed is highlighted. In the community individualism has to give way to a common call to embody love. We can't see where this branch ends and another begins! We intermingle to our discomfort for a reason. We find a sense of permanency, that God will be with us always calling us to vitality in our mission. One commentator simply states, “the mark of a faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift, to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains with Jesus.” Any branch that abides in Jesus embodies love. Love is the fruit the church is supposed to bear. One of my favorite short, pithy, slogans is, “I'm for the separation of church and hate.” Its author has it right! Jesus, who loves the entire world, calls his followers to do the same.

How do WE bear this fruit? By getting pruned, so our fruit can be picked and pressed and put to the use of the One who created sweet delights. The eternal Mother is preserving, lavishing, abiding, feeding, creating, loving her branches. Clip, clip...clip, clip. All so that love may flourish in us.

Recently, I heard the story of a small church whose members decided to disband. This is not a story of church decline though. This church disbanded one week; and started over the next. Their neighborhood had changed and they decided they were going to need to start over if they were to embrace new neighbors with open arms. What a courageous act of letting their fruit be picked and pressed and then letting themselves be cut back in order to bring forth a new beginning. They let the Vinegrower alter their way of being. In the process they learned how to truly be one in the One who was their source. The members found that what was lost was nothing compared to what they received in new life together.

“Abide in me” means trusting and placing our faith in God who abides in us always. Abide also in the connectivity between us that the vine provides so we can bear fruit together. May each one of us experience, claim and share the hand of the Pruner in our life together. Amen.