

## *Pruning, Abiding and our Gardener God*

Fifth Sunday of Easter ~ John 15:1-8

If you attended the annual congregational meeting back on January 21, you may remember the story I told you about the peach-colored rose bush in our back yard. It's not a very pretty snapshot of our marriage, but it does speak to our Gospel reading today. I am not a gardener. My typical venture into working in the yard is Memorial Day weekend when I buy potted annuals and strategically place them on the front porch. But once in a while I attempt some solidarity with my husband Barry who *is* the yard person in the family. It doesn't always go well. The peach rose bush story is a case in point.

We had a very overgrown sprawling rose bush that produced the most lovely peach roses. Barry makes a habit of wandering into the backyard to take time to smell those roses. Well, the one day I decided to help out in the yard I got "hatchet happy." I cut away much of our overgrown fauna, including that rosebush. Barry was livid. I figured it would grow back – in time. But as a gesture of peace I went to Kroger and bought him a small peach rosebush for the kitchen table. That was to compensate for the fact that I knew there would be no roses that year. We managed to stay married and by the NEXT year, the rosebush looked beautiful and was in full bloom once again – and it was well shaped and not so gangly.

I was telling that story at the annual meeting because you were processing the vestry decision to return the office position to part time after experimenting with a fulltime position for a few years. It was a difficult decision, not made lightly by your vestry, in an effort to be fiscally responsible. The budget and staffing model you have now is a more accurate picture of who you are in that it reflects what you can afford, based on what you are able to or choose to give. [I am very happy to report, by the way, that the part time position has been filled –and the very capable, vivacious and talented Kate MacEwen starts in the office on May 8, which is a week from Tuesday. Thank you thank you to Jacob Carroll for filling in as our interim office manager this month!]

The point, though, is that during times of transition in a congregation, pruning is often the work that is before you. Today Jesus describes pruning as something necessary for already fruitful branches to bear even more fruit. Successful gardeners understand that pruning increases fruitfulness. Grapevines will grow toward fruitlessness if left alone. All of the energy of the plant will go towards longer branches and more leaves if they are not pruned. Pruning refocuses the energy of the plant, directing the nutrients of the vine to the fruit. The successful gardener understands that what is required is faithfulness to the process.

And so it is, spiritually speaking, with you as a congregation. The work you are doing during this transition is really all about pruning for growth in the future. It's about paring back, re-thinking who you are, what you really have, so you will be ready to grow in new ways and new directions with a new rector. The Discovery Process is a pruning process.

Christian spiritual formation is also a pruning process. If left to ourselves, you and I will spend a lot of energy in self-absorbed activity. We need God to tend the garden of our souls so that the fruit God desires will grow in us and through us and with us.

When Jesus teaches, he uses imagery from everyday life – the everyday life of first century Palestine. Last week he used the imagery of shepherds and sheep. This week, it's the vine and the branches – something wine producers could very much relate to. If Jesus were trying to make the same point among us at this moment, I think he would use imagery more common to *our* daily life. We'll get to that shortly.

Today we meet Jesus on the night of his arrest. Jesus is well aware of what's ahead, and he begins to try to prepare his disciples for transition. (See --you're not alone.) Jesus' promise is not that things will be comfortable, but rather *fruitful*. The point is to *abide* in, to remain *connected to*, the vine. And that would be Jesus. Without that connection, there will be no fruit, no matter how hard they try. It's like the father who sent his son out on his first date driving the family car for the first time. He said to his son, "Remember who you are." When Jesus says, "I am the vine, you are the branches," he reminds the disciples who they are in relationship to him. It's the nature of the relationship that is Jesus' point.

So if Jesus was to teach us about the nature of our relationship with him today, rather than using the imagery of a vine and branches, I wonder if he might use the imagery of electricity, or maybe even computers. I wonder if he might say something like, "I am the cord, you are the light bulb." Or maybe he would say, "I am the hard drive, you are the software. Without me, you can do nothing." The pruning process is like de-fragging your disc drive, or cleaning up the

disc to make it run more effectively and efficiently. But all of this presumes a relationship between the hard drive and the software, the cord and the light bulb. Too often in the church, our anxiety gets the best of us and we go off on our own, disconnected from the vine, and we work harder and harder at doing the same thing over and over but we expect different results. You all know what that is: insanity.

It reminds me of the time I worked so hard at vacuuming my carpet and couldn't figure out why I wasn't getting any dirt up. I just kept trying harder. Finally I figured out the hose was not properly connected to the vacuum itself. That was a lot of "vigorous inertia"<sup>i</sup> I was engaged in. I was not abiding. I was working very hard, but I wasn't connected to the equipment, which was connected to the power source. It's in the abiding with Christ that the life is found. It's in the abiding with Christ that the sap gets into the veins. You can't make a bean grow by pulling on it, no matter how hard you pull. This transition process, this Discovery Process, will bear fruit that will last, as you abide in the vine, as you stay connected to Christ, undergirding the process with prayer, faithfulness in worship, serving, study, fellowship, and continued faithful, generous giving of your time, talent and your treasure.

Hannah Whitall Smith is a Quaker spiritual leader who says it this way: "We all know that growing is not a thing of effort but is the result of an inward life *principle* of growth. All the stretching and pulling in the world could not make a *dead* oak grow; but a *live* oak grows without stretching...the essential thing is to get within you the growing life.... Abide in the Vine. Let the life from Him flow through all your spiritual veins."<sup>ii</sup>

That's what a centering prayer practice does for me. It gives me a way to abide. The sacred word functions like a spigot that opens the veins for the sap to come through. It's so counter-intuitive because it requires letting go and giving up effort. We want to pull on the bean – and God wants us to abide, to help us grow from *inside* out. Church growth is an inside job.

Finally I want to switch gears a bit and leave you with some thinking about this from a friend I knew many years ago who ended up dying of cancer, after going through some rather severe trauma that tested and tried her faith and her person. "Pruning," she said, "is not to be identified with an original act of trauma, abuse or injustice." My friend Elaine came to think of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through a prized garden. Afterward, the gardener tenderly prunes the injured plants in order to guarantee survival and to restore beauty and harmony." I think that's a rather appropriate image for you just now. You have weathered some severe storms as a congregation the last many years. And God has been grieving. "Pruning," said Elaine, "is not to be confused with the tragedies that overtake us; it has more to do with clearing away the debris that the tragedies leave behind."<sup>iii</sup> That is part of the work we're engaged in now.

Abiding simply means loving the One who loves us, loving our gardener God who is not "hatchet happy" but who is all about tending wounds to restore and renew. The essential thing is to "get within you the growing life." And for that, you've come to the right place. Congratulations. Your presence here gathered around Word and Sacrament is a sign that you are abiding. I look forward to the fruit that is sure to come as your abiding and your healing continue.

*Pastor Dana Runestad*

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### **Sources**

<sup>i</sup> Lovett H. Weems, Jr., Take the Next Step: Leading Lasting Change in the Church, Nashville: Abingdon, p. 18 ["This tendency to respond to shifts in the environment by accelerating past activities might be thought of as *vigorous inertia*. The practice is universal across organizations, cultures, and history."]

<sup>ii</sup> Hannah Whitall Smith, *The Christian's Secret of a Happy Life* (Westwood, NJ: Fleming H. Revell Co., 1952), Chap. 14, 183.

<sup>iii</sup> Elaine Emeth, in Walter Wink, "Abiding, even under the knife – John 15:1-8" – *Living by the Word, Christian Century*, April 20, 1994.