

“Pruning For Growth” – John 15:1-8

It looks like another fine Spring day here on the coast ... nice to be getting a bit of warmth as well as a bit of sunshine on a weekend! Of course along with the sunshine comes the inevitable sounds of lawn mowers, hedge trimmers, weed-whackers, and leaf blowers as people all over our neighbourhood emerge from their rain shelters and attack the flora that has been re-energized and is quietly but inexorably growing, and growing, and growing. Elizabeth is busy gathering barrels of cuttings each week for the garden recycling pickups, but me – not so much. I did manage to get one little bit of work done in preparing the boat for the season, but mostly I’ve been inside pounding away on a keyboard or fighting with one computer or another!

All of that hacking and trimming and pruning came naturally to mind when I read the passage for today from John’s gospel. The constant need for challenging and fighting back the enthusiastic green growing stuff here on the West Coast tends to make us jump immediately to focus upon the pruning and trimming and hacking and chopping in this gospel text but I know that we’re not alone as people everywhere tend to do the same thing. That topic of pruning in a gospel text tends to make us nervous and causes us to turn away, feeling that if we dig too deep into it we just might get hurt by all that chopping and slashing. If, however, we persevere and do that digging I believe we can replace the threat that we feel with a deeper and more meaningful sense of affirmation – so please come with me and investigate the imagery in this saying from Jesus.

Consider how Jesus begins here, opening with the statement “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.” a declaration that echoes with some familiarity in our ears because we have heard similar statements from him: “I am the door ...”, “I am the good shepherd ...”, “I am the way, the truth, and the life” Like those other statements this discussion of vines and fruit and pruning begins with an affirmation – but this time from the risen Jesus – of his unbounded power to give us life, and life abundant. Given that opening solidarity, can we – instead of trembling in fear or turning away – take that affirmation of solid support as the foundation and basis for how we read and hear the rest of the saying? If we can indeed do that, if we can face this saying boldly with Christ holding our hand, then we are able to hear not only another powerful affirmation but also an everlasting promise of ongoing sustenance and support.

Our fear usually begins right after Jesus’ opening statement, feeling a bit threatened by the declaration that the Father removes every branch that bears no fruit, worrying that we might be the ones who get lopped off. That’s a pity, because if we start listening to our fear and stop listening to the text we are likely to miss the immediately following more positive affirmation that it is those branches that do bear fruit that are pruned. Maybe it’s our fear of even being pruned, never mind being removed, that causes us to usually go no further here, which is hugely too bad because when we drop out here we miss the powerful affirmation.

That affirmation? “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.” We’ve already been pruned, which is what the word cleansed means here. Stop for a moment and think about it. We’ve just had a warning that those branches that do not bear fruit are removed, and those that do are pruned, and are told that we are already pruned. The implication is clear – we are branches that are bearing fruit ... we are NOT about to be removed. And to make that distinction even clearer, the words in the original Greek are quite different that express the two actions. The removing of branches is done with the verb ‘airei, which has all the implications of chopping off, gathering up, sweeping away, and carting off to the dump. By contrast, the word used for pruning is katharoi, which is the same root as the word we know as catharsis, or cleansing. Two quite different implications – the first emphasises the cuttings that

are gone, gone, gone ... but the second, referring to us, emphasises the new, improved version that remains. Those are vastly different perspectives, aren't they? The important part is that we are the ones cleansed by the word that Christ has spoken to us, and that we have heard, and to which we have responded.

And that leads us from the powerfully positive affirmation into the eternal and life-giving promise that follows, "Abide in me as I abide in you ... those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." But what does Jesus mean by "abide in me"? That theme of abiding is a constant and frequent one throughout John's gospel, tightly interwoven with the theme of believing, both pointing to a life in Christ ... but importantly not in some future afterlife but right here and right now. You may recall that Jesus opened his discussions about his coming passion with his pronouncement of preparing dwelling places for us. The word for dwelling has the same root as the word for abide, and here the risen Christ once again uses the term abiding, having already fulfilled his promise to come again and dwell with his followers.

And so we have this wonderful composite image of healthy, well-trimmed branches firmly attached to the life-giving vine, being sustained by the nutrition provided by that vine, abiding and living fruitfully. That image brings forth (yes, as in bears) all kinds of other fruitful understandings as well. For example, the related concepts of relationships and community. Just as a lone, struggling, wanna-be-vine branch has scant chances of ever bearing fruit, so too it is those branches firmly attached to a healthy, well-rooted and carefully-tended vine that will blossom, and flourish, and grow, and produce.

There is one more important concept this imagery offer us: we need to remember that a powerful vine carries many, many branches. The image Jesus puts before us is not one of a vine with a single branch, a kind of "Jesus and me" isolation ... the image he evokes is one of "Jesus and all of us together." We are part of a community, a large and diverse faith community, grafted together by the life we receive from Jesus and the care and tending we receive from God. It is in relationship both with Jesus and with each other that we are truly nourished, truly receive real sustenance, and truly abide forever. The life we receive from our attachment to Jesus enables us to last, to persist, to endure, to continue in community and fellowship both with him and with each other.

Recognizing that leads us into yet another key understanding offered by Jesus in this collage of images from the vineyard, namely an understanding about bearing fruit. When Jesus calls us to be branches firmly attached to the vine of life – to him – he is not proposing that we simply latch on like suckers or leeches to draw life from him. The central theme of this message is about taking the sustenance from the vine that he offers and putting it to good use – bearing fruit. To make it even a bit clearer, the word fruit here is not so much the idea of shiny objects hanging on us like decorations on a Christmas tree as it refers to the concept of creating results, outcomes, and even more so deeds. The notion of bearing fruit here is clearly about action, activity, about doing, about bringing into being, about causing things to happen ... bearing fruit here is not about looking pretty, it's about taking basic elements and creating rich, life-sustaining nutrients: reaching out, helping others, proclaiming the word, welcoming strangers, uplifting the downtrodden, supporting each other, contributing to our community.

What is the ultimate purpose and result of all this activity? "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be[come] my disciples." Another image, this time of a grizzled old master of the vineyard, standing back and viewing his fields and vines with great satisfaction, seeing healthy branches pulsing with life, nurtured and sustained by their vine, reaching out into the glorious sunshine, and producing delicious and abundant fruit. A pastoral picture, pleasant

and pleasing, reflecting the love and care that the Father has for the Son, and for each one of us, people who have already been cleansed by the Word of God.

So take heart ... fear not ... don't hit the word pruning and recoil; instead hear this passage and be affirmed. You are one of the branches sustained by the life-giving vine that is Christ, and as we continue to abide in him we have the assurance that he will continue to abide in us, nurturing and sustaining and helping us in the company of all other believers to bear fruit and glorify God.