

Sermon, 5th Sunday after Easter, May 2, 2021

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What better place to preach on this Gospel passage than Lodi, where we are surrounded by thousands of acres of vineyards and count among our congregation persons, and families that have been engaged in viticulture for generations?! In preparing my remarks today I did my usual research into Biblical commentaries, and prayerful reflection, but I also tried to learn more about the actual practice of vine cultivation - both on line and from a very patient John Ledbetter. Thanks, John!

What I learned from that research was that while our Gospel passage today may be metaphorical in speaking about Jesus as the vine, the importance of pruning, outlined in the Gospel, was in Jesus' time - and remains now - good practice in real vineyards. To produce the best fruit, a grape vine must be pruned. The pruning concentrates the energy of the plant in fewer places increasing the quality and quantity of the fruit. However, considerable skill is required to know when to prune and where to prune. The vine dresser must know the vine to be able to care for the vine. Just like the shepherd, who knows their sheep, as we recall from last week's Gospel.

So what might Jesus be trying to tell us. He was a keen observer of everyday life in rural Galilee. His speech is laced with references to shepherds, vineyard, farmers. In those mundane activities, Jesus extracted examples/stories to illumine our relationship to God.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. The heart of John's Gospel is embedded in these two statements. John's Gospel is all about relationships. The relationship between Jesus and his father, between Jesus and his disciples, and between the disciples and the Father.

If we are to be fruitful, to live out our lives as faithful, fruitful disciples, we must remain (abide), stay connected to Jesus. He is our source. He is our lifeline. His life, his spirit, inspire and energize us to be his witnesses in the world.

John in composing this Gospel wants to emphasize in as many ways as he can the critical importance of remaining and cultivating that connection to Jesus. To be faithful, to be loving, to embody Jesus' love in the world - that is being fruitful.

So, what's the pruning about? For John's church, that was threatened by a hostile surrounding community, pruning meant recognizing that not all would abide - some would fall away. And the suffering the community faced - was also a kind of pruning - and something they should expect, since Jesus, too, had suffered.

While we do not at present experience persecution for our faith, we too are in need of pruning. Of noting those things that drain or diminish or distract us from our focus on Jesus and of embodying Jesus' love in the world.

Traditionally we employ three methods of pruning in the Christian tradition: prayer, fasting and almsgiving. Each is a good thing in and of itself, but each is also a pruning of inclinations, habits - that would, if left "unpruned" drain our energy/focus, like a wild vine.

Prayer — is a discipline of time. Time set aside for reflection and prayer and turning our attention to God. Pruning our desire for control of our schedule - our scattered, gadget-driven distractibility for the latest post or tweet. Prayer requires a commitment of time, focused attention.

Fasting. This too is a pruning - of our appetite surely, but also of our desire for immediate gratification . It is also a reminder of our basic animalness. We need to eat to survive. If we don't learn what hunger means, we can't really appreciate how fortunate we are to enjoy our meals that for the most part are readily available. Fasting also cultivates compassion at a visceral level for those who have no choice but to fast, for whom hunger is a daily and debilitating reality.

Almsgiving. The practice of charity, of providing for the needs of others, is a pruning of our avarice, our greed, of the lie that suggests that meaning and security come from amassing. Almsgiving prunes, counters, our cultural mantra that fuels virtually all our advertising - that you can never have enough.

Prayer, fasting, almsgiving - tried and true methods of pruning those malicious vines of self centeredness that can drain our capacity to bear the fruit Jesus calls us to produce.

I'd like to suggest one other area of pruning that's particularly urgent in our time. The pernicious vine of racism. Theologian, Jim Wallis, calls it America's original sin. I've had the privilege over the last nine months to facilitate a small group here at St John's using a curriculum from our nation church offices called Sacred Ground. Over these last several months we've explored the history of this nation from the point of view of those who were marginalized, murdered, enslaved because of their race. It's not a pretty history. Most of us were amazed at how much we didn't know, that got left out of our previous U.S. history classes. And in the process we began pruning another vine, connected to racism - our unexamined privilege that is built into our systems of law and economy that favors people, "who look like me".

Black and brown sisters and brothers in our community taught us just a little of what it was like to be person of color in Lodi: the harassment, the racist taunts, the little put downs, the suspicion, and the blatant hostility. Mickey, a local Latina activist, and one of our guest speakers told us how whenever she enters a room = restaurant, meeting, congregation -= she looks around to see if it's safe. Is it going to be a place that welcomes her - a habit born of many bad experiences.

The pruning away of that sense of secure entitlement takes work and time. But it's one we've committed to as a group, looking for ways we can shed old assumptions and build new bridges with the rest of our community.

We invite you into that pruning as well. It's important work for our integrity and growth in discipleship. But it's also important for us as a congregation, if we want to grow and flourish and be fruitful.

One question we explored in our last Sacred Ground group - are we, St. John's, a welcoming space? Are we ready and willing to welcome those who look different? come from different backgrounds? Are we willing to extend ourselves to greet, welcome, attend to their needs? It's such an important question!

In the many conversations I've had since I arrived about folks' hope for St. John's - one consistent theme was the desire to attract young people, young families, and to be more engaged in the community. Here is email I recently received:

"My husband and I have made a plan to leave our current church in July of this year. It has been a very bumpy road there. Friends have recommended that we look into St. John's. We are very interested in finding a church that is radically welcoming to all, a church that believes diversity is important, and one where our age (mid 20's), theological beliefs, and political beliefs might be tolerated/accepted. (Just so you know where we're coming from, at our current church, we are rejected over those things)."

Now I suggested that they all come to St. John's - because I experience this congregation as living up to it's mission statement of being, "Committed to living a faith journey that is sacred, intentional, compassionate and inclusive.'

But this commitment requires expression - by all of us. It's not just the job of the ushers - welcoming is everyone's job - if we want to grow. If we want St. John's to be a flourishing vineyard of discipleship, a fruitful expression of God's love in Lodi, we, you and I need to prune those habits of behavior or attitude that would limit our love, constrain our compassion. It's in that spirit that the Vestry this week agreed to co-sponsor Lodi's first ever Pride Day. Leaning into what our Presiding Bishop calls, God's Beloved Community. What that email represents is not just the search of one couple, but the search of many who are looking for what we are at our best - if we stay closely connected to our source, Jesus, and are prepared embody God's loving embrace to the diverse and gifted community beyond our doors.