

Montague Pastoral Charge

April 28, 2024 – Fifth Sunday of Easter, Camping Sunday

Acts 8:26-40, John 15:1-8

Sermon: “Pruning, Grafting, Abiding”

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There’s a certain panic I get when it’s the time of year to prune something. Gardeners, orchard-keepers, and vinegrowers have to have an unsentimental heart; otherwise they would be too timid for the job. I find it hard to believe, when I’m holding the saw or the clippers to a healthy branch on a precious fruit tree, that cutting off this growth will really bring it more health and fruitfulness. I get emotionally involved with the plants. It’s the same problem I have in the garden; I can’t even thin my carrot seedlings without getting a bit teary on behalf of the little sprouts.

There’s a bit of Greek wordplay in our Gospel reading today: “[God] *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 *cleansed* by the word that I have spoken to you.” The word for “removing” the unfruitful branches, the word for “pruning” the good branches, and the word for “cleansing” the disciples are all from the same root, and you can hear a relationship between them. The difference between “cut off” and “prune” is three letters in Greek: *airo* instead of *kathairo*. The pun there is inviting us to consider what the difference is: if I’m a branch of the vine getting clipped, am I being cut off to be tossed on the burn pile, or am I being pruned so that I can bear more fruit? Does the branch know the difference when it feels the farmer’s clippers?

It’s a theme we’ve met before in the Fourth Gospel: “This is the judgement, that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil” (and they didn’t want the light to expose them). The same event, say the coming of light or the pruning of a branch, can be either judgement or grace, depending on how it’s experienced and what it means. So: which is it for me, when I feel the vinekeeper’s clippers? Well, I suppose it depends on which side of the cut my life is to be found: on the side closer to the vine-stem, or the side farther out that’s reaching out on its own for more light? When we experience the loss of something – a phone, a car, a job, a relationship – does our life fall away with it like a dead twig, or do we experience it as a pruning that brings us even closer to the root and the source of our life? On which side of the cut is our life to be found?

This passage in John is the last of seven “I am” statements that Jesus makes. (“I am the light of the world, I am the bread of life, I am the good shepherd,” etc.) Each of those images is rich, with deep resonances in the Hebrew Scriptures. This one is unique, though. It describes an unprecedented union and intimacy. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches: there’s a sharing of life and destiny there. We’re all part of the same living whole; we share the same water and nourishment that flows up from the roots of the vine-stock. We had Jesus the good shepherd last week, calling and guiding us as sheep, but this one says even more. We’re branches of the one vine, and it would be hard to pinpoint exactly where the vine ends and the branch begins.

Vines get out of control, though. If you’ve ever tried to take off a wild grape vine from a wire fence, you’ll know what I mean. You don’t just make a clip and pull it off. It’s an hour-long

battle of twisting; you can't tell which way it's growing, sometimes it's writhed around itself; it's like trying to unravel a Gordian knot. It's man versus nature and by no means obvious that man will win. If you finally do triumph, the casualties will usually include a couple of strands of fence-wire, a set of clippers, and the better part of an eyeball. Wild vines grow long and fast, groping for the light, tangling around other trees, never producing grapes but only wood and foliage, until they find the sunlight of their choosing.

Jesus says, "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." At first hearing this doesn't make sense. How can a branch *not* abide in its vine? They're connected, they're the same organism. But maybe he is thinking of these wild branches that go astray, far from the vine-stem. He may be thinking of far-reaching tree limbs that tip the centre of gravity of the whole tree, or the runners that shoot out from the mother plant, like strawberries, ready to root themselves so that one day they can be cut off from the mother. That kind of thing is fine for strawberries – that's how they propagate – but not for the Church. That's not how the Church propagates. The Church grows outward as one. Sometimes it grows the way we see it growing in the Book of Acts today: by grafting. There we have this complete outsider, an Ethiopian eunuch from beyond the Roman Empire, wanting to come in, even though his culture is drastically different and he is ritually unclean because of his body and his sexual identity. But God the gardener grafts him into the vine; he is baptized and becomes the first African Christian. The Church grows like that, by reaching out and gathering in, not by sending out individual shoots to go it alone.

Do you know what the largest single living thing in the world is? It's not a blue whale, it's not an African elephant. It's a gigantic tree. But not a California redwood – those are the tallest, but even bigger than a redwood is "Pando," the quaking aspen tree in Utah. You wouldn't realise it was a single tree, because it's really a single tree in the form of a forest – thousands of tree-trunks, all with the same DNA, all connected by the same gigantic root system. Pando takes up over 100 acres and about 6,000 tonnes. It sends out new suckers, but they don't root themselves like strawberries, they stay intimately connected to the root system. That's more like what the Church is. "Apart from me you can do nothing," Jesus says. We may be suckers off one root system, limbs of the one tree, but we're not meant to go "out on a limb," and if we do, we need pruning.

So let's be practical for a moment: what are the ways that our spiritual lives need pruning today? I shouldn't even say "spiritual lives" – I don't like that phrase, because all our life is spiritual. Where in our lives do we need the saw or the secateurs? Where are we overgrown and woody? In what ways have we grown far from God, far from our Stem and Root? What keeps us from abiding in God? What are the ways that we don't just go astray but overgrow and overextend ourselves like a limb putting its centre of gravity away from the trunk? How are we choosing to abide somewhere other than in God, the Ground of our being?

Sometimes it's obvious what in our life needs pruning. It may be physical things, it may be possessions, it may be bad habits that hurt ourselves or take up our time – time that we could be spending in relationship with God. Sometimes it's our speech that needs pruning: too much chatter, too much gossip, too much judgement. But often it's more subtle; sometimes what keeps us from abiding in God has the appearance of being good stuff: our own high expectations of ourselves, an unrealistic self-image; sometimes it's our expectations of our families or our children. Think of the ways that we try to extend ourselves in space and time like overgrown

branches, trying to be in control of things we don't have much control over. Social media can be very dangerous on that front: if we're not careful, we end up scrolling through other people's lives, trying to be all the things that God is: omniscient, omnipresent, and omnipotent. That is to say: we behave as if we can know everything, be everywhere, and have a say in everything, all in the comfort of our own digital space. For many of us, pruning our screen time alone would be a good place to start.

And sometimes even our best intentions take us away from the vine: all our projects and community service, even these very good things may need to be pruned back a little if they are keeping us from abiding in the vine. Because without the vine, our best efforts won't get us very far. "Apart from me, you can do nothing," Jesus says. Our bustle and busy-ness may need pruning, because if we're constantly on the move, we're never quite *abiding*. There has to be time for stillness too. As Dwight D. Eisenhower said to an overenthusiastic Secretary of State, "Don't just do something, stand there!"

We don't use the word "abide" much these days, but even many of the newer Bible translations still use it here, because "abiding in Christ," says it a lot better than "remaining in Christ" would say it. To abide is to make your home somewhere, to be still there, peaceful and restful. It's a special kind of stillness, too: it's not a passive stillness but an active stillness. To abide is to be sort of *actively* still or *energetically* restful. You don't "abide" in bed until 11 a.m., you *stay* in bed till 11. On the other hand, when you stay up all night with a loved one in hospice care, you're not just "staying" with them, you're *abiding* with them. Abiding means staying faithful, dwelling somewhere in spite of any turbulence that will assail you. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "and I in you." It's like the disciples on the road to Emmaus who walked with Jesus without knowing it was him. "Stay with us," they say to the stranger, "for it is almost evening, and the day is far gone." They ask him to stay and Jesus does more than stay, he *abides* with them. Approach God and God approaches you; we abide in God and God abides in us. There's a mutual indwelling and a mutual longing, as God lovingly shares the lifeblood of the vine with us.

Jesus is giving us the definition of the Church here: the Church is supremely a place and a people of abiding, actively resting in one another and in God. That's what our young people learn at camp, in all their sporting and feasting and hiking and worshipping together. And no matter how different we are, we're all one, not just because we're all human, but because we all abide together and God in us; we all feed from the same root.

The Church isn't only community of action; we're also a community of stillness. And stillness isn't the same thing as inaction. In the church we like to be at the frontline of social action, and sometimes that's the best place for us. But we also have a critical spot behind the scenes, as the place and people where the frontline fighters can come home to and refresh themselves in God's presence, renew their strength in the peace of God. It's not an accident that so many of the Civil Rights leaders were devout people of faith. Not only did their faith cry out for justice, their faith gave also them an abiding place where they could meet God and feed off of God like branches from the one vine, renew their strength for this hard battle.

In downtown Helsinki, in Finland, right at one of the busiest intersections, there's what they call the "Chapel of Silence." It's a pretty hip piece of Nordic architecture; it's a simple, elegant wood-panelled oval structure, but the most interesting feature is that it's built to be noise-cancelling. Busy people on their way to work can step in off the hubbub of the city street into this deep, thick silence. Everything extraneous just sort of leaves you at the door, and you can

really abide in God for as long as you want. A minute in that thick silence is worth a few hours at least.

So, “the Lord is in his holy Temple; let all the earth keep silence,” the prophet says. “Be still and know that I am God.” Let’s work on our abiding. Because “abide in me” is the commandment before all others. William Temple writes, “All forms of Christian worship, all forms of Christian discipline, have this as their object. Whatever leads to this is good; whatever hinders this is bad; whatever does not bear on this is futile. This is the life of the Christian: *Abide in me, and I in you*. All truth and depth of devotion, all effectiveness in service spring from this. It is not a theme for words but for the deeper apprehensions of silence, *Abide in me and I in you*.”