

John 15:1-8

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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 cleansed 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.*

A Time for Pruning - May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8

What a gorgeous weekend this has been! Yesterday as we interred the ashes of our friend Cass Burns, it was so peaceful to look around the memorial garden, see the Hosta starting to bloom, the trees greening up, and a nice breeze swirling around us. Of course, I looked at my car yesterday and found that the pollen was so thick I could write my name in it. But that is what Spring is about, isn't it?

It is so appropriate that we celebrate the resurrection of Jesus in the Spring. Easter represents the ultimate source of new life and new beginnings. In Jesus, we receive the wonderful promise of Eternal Life with him — a life that begins not when our bodies die, but is available to us now. Right now. The best news of all is that the invitation to walk with Jesus is a forever invitation. It's not like the car sales on TV which are here for a week then go away. Jesus extends his invitation to walk with him always. We are always free to accept it. Even better news, Jesus' invitation is not a once-only chance, we are welcome to restore our relationship with the risen Christ at any time! That is the depth of the love he brings to us. We can, and have, walked away from Jesus and the church. But we always can come back knowing that our savior is there to welcome us with open arms.

Look at scripture. In a way, the Bible tells the story of humanity moving toward God and then backing away. Time and again, we learn of people back then first having faith, then losing it. Time and again we see God inviting the people back — sometimes allowing them to experience the foolishness of their mistakes — but always, always, always inviting them back to start again.

The story of scripture is our own story. Life simply does not, cannot remain the same. Times change, we change. If we are to be honest, our relationships with each other change. There is nothing wrong in confessing our relationship with God changes, swinging from seasons of faith to seasons of doubt. But this is normal. This is natural.

Because change is part of life and living, instead of resisting it, we need to accept it. Not all change is good — at least when seen in the short run. I'm sure all us can point to times of change in our lives which we absolutely dreaded, but later on, we realized that the change was actually good for us, maybe even very good for us. Yes, there are also changes that were not good when they happened and are still not good months or even years later. No question that the loss of close friends and family leave a hole which time can never quite fill. Nevertheless, we still have the choice to dwell in the past and do nothing but mourn the present or live in the present so we can put the past in its proper place.

Friends, in all the seasons of change, just like in the season of Spring, we have to make adjustments. We need to alter our ideas. We find we have to reorient our perceptions. One inevitable ritual of Spring is the act of pruning.

Yes, pruning. Moving about our trees and shrubs and slicing away the parts that are no longer producing or are excessive or are choking off the growth of the rest of the plant. Every year we get out the shears and we trim, trim, trim away — trimming away what is no longer necessary.

Now at first, after we prune, the plants we trim may not look so good. As a child, we had massive forsythia bushes in our yard and my parents would cut away huge hunks of them. My job was to pick up the branches and cut them further so they would fit into the trash bags. After they were finished pruning, the bushes look rather small and spindly. However, I also knew that from these small, spindly bushes, new green shoots would emerge and in a few months, the bush would be covered in beautiful yellow flowers once again.

A forsythia bush which is not pruned regularly is not a pretty sight. Even in the height of blooming season, when it should be covered in flowers, it isn't. Yes, there are some blossoms, but the excess branches and leaves hinder the flowers. Too many branches just get in the way and prevent the plant from achieving its full potential.

Jesus applied the same analogy to grapevines. Wine, of course, was a staple drink back then. People used to mix wine with water regularly because somehow the wine made regular water safer to drink. They didn't know about bacteria and how alcohol would kill it back then. But they did know that to maximize the yield of a grapevine, they had to prune it back every year to rid it of the unproductive branches. That was one of the main responsibilities of a vinegrower — pruning, pruning, and more pruning.

Hence the vine is constantly changing. It never stays the same. In the seasons of a vine, old unproductive growth is cut away and new growth appears. The goal is always to rid the vine of whatever is standing in the way of that vine being as productive as possible.

Too often, we may forget, or resist, the idea that if pruning is helpful, even necessary, for the growth of plants, then pruning in our lives can be helpful and necessary for us. Let's admit that all of us can benefit from some pruning in our lives from time to time. Now plants don't have nerves and the don't have feelings. Can you imagine a plant screaming whenever we took the shears to it? Plants don't look at the old branches on the ground with regret, saying, "Oh, that was once part of me!"

No doubt we sometimes act that way whenever we lose something we were attached to. Pruning in our lives is undoubtedly a process which sometimes brings pain but it also is a process that brings possibility.

The fact is, pruning in our lives is inevitable because change is inevitable. Like it or not, parts of our lives are going to be pruned away. However, the good news is that although we will all experience episodes of pruning in our lives, we don't have to experience them alone.

Jesus proclaims himself as the true vine. In fact, he is not only the true vine, he is also the vinegrower. God in Jesus Christ planted us, waters and cares for us, and knows about every stage of our growth. So when it comes to the times of pruning in our lives, we trust that Jesus is fully aware that the shears of life are at work cutting, cutting, cutting. And Jesus is aware that when we are pruned, we may experience massive pain and regret at the sight of the cuttings of our lives lying on the ground around us.

But that is where having a firm relationship with Jesus the vinegrower makes all the difference. When we are pruned, when the great changes come to us in life, we can choose to be afraid that the changes are going to hurt us going forward or we can choose to believe that Jesus who knows how life has pruned us is in fact the master vinegrower who will also work to restore us — not only restore us, but make all things new and better.

When the plants of Spring get pruned, they become stronger and produce more than they did before. When our lives are pruned — as then inevitably will be, then through faith they can become stronger, our lives can produce more than ever before.

Jesus tells us to not be afraid. No question. The perils of everyday life produce more than enough reasons to be afraid. But we are not alone! All of us, all of us who have faith in Our Lord Jesus Christ are fully grafted into him. He is the vine. We are his branches. It is true that without him, we can do nothing at all. Oh, my friends, but with him, with him, with him, we can conquer the world! Go ahead and allow yourself to be pruned by the master vinegrower!

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.