

St Pius & St Anthony 5th Sunday Easter Year B2 (John 15:1-8)

Jesus' talk about the Vine and Branches, brought back to me the attempts I've made many years ago, to grow grapes. I had two plants about ten feet apart I tried to grow along a laundry line set-up, did decently producing grapes, but my biggest success was the several slips that a neighbor asked for and he created a vineyard out of them in his own yard. So the victory from that garden wasn't my own, but my neighbors' who is still raising a crop every year (and he would bring me jelly). Someone living there after me, cut them down to better mow yard better (or maybe the contract mowers thought it would be better!)

But Jesus is bringing up vine and branches to teach us how we best flourish in relationship to Him: as a good branch to Him, the Vine! We must remain connected to Him – and we will grow and bloom. Yet apart from him, we will dry and wither. But it is not just staying connected to him that leads us to life, we also must face our inevitable pruning. That detail (inevitable pruning), can provide us a lot of insight into managing life. I draw a lot of helpful meaning and motive to accept the typical discomfort and seeming unfairness of life, from Jesus' example here, when He says that ***even when a limb bears fruit, it will still be pruned.*** If you asked a branch if it wants to be pruned, I'm certain it would say "NO-Leave me alone-Pruning hurts." (who wants to get snipped-clipped-cut off?) Maybe when those inconvenient things occur in our lives, (sickness, broken expectations, frustrations) we can imagine them to be 'prunings' – something being cut from us to enable us to grow even more and bear more fruit. Because Jesus says 'pruning' is required to bear more fruit. And consider that a branch unchecked can damage itself growing into the wind (to break off maybe killing it or threatening the whole vine with death) or be susceptible to fungus/rot by growing over onto the ground or being trampled and breaking open its stem, & inviting in ants/insects to raid its food/water juices). So, Jesus is saying pruning is necessary to maximize the life of the branch.

I can't think of limb pruning without thinking, of a favorite story (*maybe I've told it before, but it is a dear one to me, because my granddad shared it with me- it makes me smile thinking of him surprising me, in telling it!*) It's about a kid, maybe a future veterinarian, who was entrusted with some basic duties caring for a new litter of pups on farm.

I do say in advance, this is going to hurt. A great story, but it hurts.....

A dad knew his son loved checking on the new pups in the barn, and the dad thought he would give his son an important job, of after they got a few days old, to bob/cut off the pups' tails. He had watched his dad do it with previous litters, but dad had resisted giving him the job earlier, (maybe because of the sharp knives or questioning whether he had heart enough to cut, or stomach

enough to handle blood). But dad wanted to entrust greater responsibility to him so he gave him the cut job. That day, he had seen his son going in and out of the barn several times that day, and suspected that his son was being especially solicitous and pampering toward pups maybe due to pain or guilt from lopping off their tails, so he asked his kid “What are you doing in there so often? Did you get it done?” The boy responded, “Yes, Dad, but I wanted to go easy on them and not hurt them by cutting off the whole tail all at once, so I just go and snip a little off each trip” *Oh, no, for mercy's sake, just get that job over!*

But back to Jesus' use of a vine/branches teaching image today He uses to account for our needed growth and bearing more fruit, **as a result** of pruning. We can agree that 'pruning' may not be fun to receive, but it is necessary. We can think of that when things just don't go the way we think they ought to – “Is this my pruning (that I have to cut-let go of what I thought or expected) in order to bear this 'more fruit' that Jesus desires for me?” It's something helpful to consider for our peace of mind, when accepting events/circumstances out of our control.

But I love here, Jesus' continued unique style of teaching. His convincing method using pictorial allegories and practical illustrations to enlighten us on how to thrive in this world through more spiritual living. (And answering life's big questions of meaning & purpose – what is all this about, and where does it go!)

Similar to this 'picture story teaching method, is Jesus' technique of using parables, easily memorable yet grippingly graphic, to teach and impress life tips (what do we say now- 'lifehacks') upon us. I love how Jesus so often took up organic, natural images often encountered in daily experiences, such as seeds and soil, wheat and weeds, shepherds and sheep, or today talking about vine trunks and their branches, to teach us. I find that his 'earthy' method teaching about God's Kingdom, is His way of saying, 'God is in this, too' 'God is behind this'. That even the ordinary common things we encounter every minute in our day's dramas or the troubles we are tasked with all the time, that they can all be sieves/doors/ciphers to understanding the greater things of God (*like glimpses of grace or invitations to the infinite hidden in everything-God is in it, if we seek Him-seek His Hand*)

So, what specifically is Jesus teaching us through His vine and branches illustration? He says, “Stay with me – Connected to me, you will bear fruit-you get it all, yet apart from me – nothing. Similar to the Resurrection Appearance story read in daily mass after Easter, in John 21:1-14, about Peter and other apostles returning to fishing work, when they ventured out fishing alone all night and catching nothing! Jesus shows up on beach and directs them to fish the other side, and Bingo -the greatest catch surfaces, and that they can't even pull it into

the boat-they have to row to the shore and drag it up on the sand to empty it. Without Jesus, nothing, yet with Him, everything.

And with the proper hand of Jesus, pruning is necessary for good growth or as Jesus says, 'to bear much fruit'. If that pruning is still hard for us to accept, we could ask any rose garden-grower or grape vine tender, and they will say that unless you want the vine/bush to go wild, you have to vigorously trim and trim and trim. (Again, I'm sure the branch doesn't like it, but it is what brings the most life out of it). If a vine overextends itself, pushing out a lot of extra unnecessary leaves, that just results in diverting the life juice of the plant away from the fruit or flower (grape growers see that when they cut away unneeded leaves to create juicier, fuller grapes or flower growers, cut and cut to multiply the blooms instead of the plant going to seed). Pruning brings more life. I recall that when Jesus described Himself as the Good Shepherd, in John 10:10 he said, "I came that they may have life, and have **life abundantly.**" That abundant life, or 'more fruit' comes only through pruning (John 15:2). So we must remain connected to Christ the vine, to stay close to Him, and also, welcome the pruning that comes from the vine-grower's hand that allows us to bear much fruit-our share in eternal life.