

May 2nd 2021

John 15:1-8

I was a member of the young adult group at my home church. One of the couples in the group owned a grape farm, and we often met as a group at their house for picnics and campfires. When I decided to go into the ministry Jim took me to the vineyard and showed me exactly how the vine grows. There is a trunk, almost tree-like, but it is more like a small tree branch in size. Individual vines grow out of the trunk and leaves shoot off the vines, along with clusters of grapes hidden amidst the leaves. Since grapes ripen at the end of summer, early fall, you might believe that all the work comes at harvest time when the grapes are ready to pick. That isn't so... grapes are a year-round job. They must be tied onto the wire fence, fertilized, and pruned. Those of you who garden understand that pruning produces a better harvest. It means trimming away what is brown and withered, and cutting back some of the new growth too so that the plant doesn't overtake the surroundings.

In our gospel reading today we heard that Jesus is the true vine, that God the Father is the vine-grower, he trims away everything in Jesus that isn't bearing fruit. Our pericope discussion group this week talked about pruning, about cutting back the things that aren't fruitful, and how painful that must be, not only to the piece being cut off, but to the plant in general. And, possibly, to the vine-grower, because it isn't easy to cut away things that one is attached to. Believe me, I know. With our move last year I've had to go through things that I somehow accumulated throughout my life that I have no room to bring into our house. Unfortunately I'm not finished... the garage is still pretty full of stuff. However it will be sorted out and the things that are not absolutely necessary to keep will be tossed, sold, or donated. Some of these things have a lot of memories attached, but they aren't living, breathing entities. As I sort through them there will be a bit of pain as I prune. Yet, as I said, these are things... as I'm writing this I'm wondering what inside of me do I need to prune?

On some days I'm just plain irritable; perhaps I need to find a way to prune the irritability. They say exercise is good for that! I was driving to the store Friday, a bit miffed that I had to go get some cold medicine for Bill before I even had time to eat breakfast. And my attitude was affecting the way I was relating to other drivers. Then, I saw a bumper sticker on the back of a car that said, "Be kind." And it struck me, that's my mantra... boy did I need to see that just then, or I probably would have had a bad attitude the entire time I was in the store, and that would have been reflected in the way I treated everyone there. I thank God for that little sticker reminding me that it's not all about me.

I'm sure there's plenty of other things I could prune out of me to be more fruitful... how about you? Can you find something that, if eliminated, would make you a better person? What can you do about that? Pray for God to open your eyes to whatever can be improved, then work on ways you can improve. God wants us to be at

our best, not only so we can enjoy life to the fullest, but also for growing the Kin-dom. Jesus said, "I am the vine you are the branches.... Abide in me... those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit..." How can we be more Christ-like? What can we each do to bear more fruit?

Be kind. Now that doesn't mean being a doormat, not standing up for yourself. It does mean to be kind as you do. It means to do everything you do out of love. The first letter of John to the churches, part of the second reading we heard this morning, tells us that "everyone who loves is born of God and knows God." "No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." "We love because he first loved us." Elsewhere in the Bible we are told that we are God's children. We know who and whose we are; we know how to thrive.

A difficult side of this equation is if God is love, why do so many terrible things happen in this world? God loves by dwelling with us, living with us whether we are in the midst of agony or in a time of joy, and every time in between. Much of life may not seem to make much sense, at least on this side of the grave. For many of us, God is the Stranger who acts or does not act. And yet, we abide with this Stranger and sometimes behold a glimpse of meaning. Sometimes God becomes present to us and dwells with us because of the jarring, meaningless experiences of life. God is with us, and wants us to live in him.

"In this is love," John writes, "not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins." John makes the case that God is the source of love, and that this love is seen most clearly in the death of Jesus on the cross -- a sacrifice designed to bring us forgiveness of sin. So God is love, ... at the very core of God's being. God reveals that he is the source of love by sending his Son to bring us forgiveness and new life.

As recipients of such amazing love, there is really only one response we can make: To show love to one another. And this is precisely what John recommends: "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another." Sometimes learning to love one another takes pruning something from inside ourselves; taking the log out of our own eye before we criticize the stick in the other's eye. Sometimes, it simply means a bumper sticker that reads, "Be kind."

All glory be to God.

Amen.