

The weather is starting to get warmer... a bit. Gardeners are out cleaning up the debris left behind by winter. Maybe you are one of them. Dead branches are being gathered up. Branches that are still alive are being pruned or cut back. The pruning process is quite interesting. Some branches are called suckers and are snipped off. They are called suckers because they suck up the life-giving sap but produce nothing. Snipping off the suckers means that more of the precious sap is redirected to the branches that will actually produce fruit and profit. The process does not hurt the vine but actually makes it more healthy and capable of bearing fruit that is well formed and plentiful. When suckers are removed, the vine will flourish in an extraordinary fashion.

In the spiritual life a kind of pruning takes place. Jesus tells us that we have already been cleansed by the word. What does that mean? A cleansing takes place within us when we respond to the call for repentance. We begin abandoning pathways of behavior that we have come to recognize as sinful. In response to the words of Jesus we resolve to clean up our lives. We make a break with the past. We can now devote more of our time and energy to living a healthier, happier and more productive spiritual life. As we listen more and more to Jesus and strive to remain united to him, we are transformed. We become another Christ. It is no longer we who live, but Christ who lives in us.

In today's Gospel, Jesus asks us to abide in him. To abide in Jesus means to remain attached to Jesus. To be attached to Jesus is to have the life of Jesus flowing within us. If we remain connected to Jesus our lives will bear great fruit, the kind of fruit that God is looking for.

Human life is very, very different from plant life. A branch has no choice but to remain on the vine to which it is attached. With sufficient soil, moisture and sunlight and the right conditions, it has no choice but to grow, as nature intended. Unlike plants, much of our growth as human beings is a matter of choice. Spiritual growth does not happen automatically. If we wish to grow spiritually, we have to choose to do so. St. Bernard used to say, "To consent is to be saved." Spiritual growth requires not only our consent. It also requires our attention and care.

Sacraments dispense grace but they do not dispense grace magically. Preparing for sacraments is always important. But what we do after receiving a sacrament is

important too. We need to cultivate the garden which is our spiritual life. This always requires some effort on our part.

In the interviews taking place with families who have children preparing for their First Holy Communion and for the Sacrament of Confirmation, we talk about how we can make our spiritual life grow? During the course of the interview, we begin to put together a short list of some things we can do to cultivate our own spiritual life and make it grow: things like coming to church, which, by the way, children themselves usually bring up first. Children get it! Receiving Holy Communion regularly helps us to keep our union and friendship with Jesus alive and strong.

Jesus took the time to pray. He thought it was important. We need to pray too. St. Theresa of Kolkata spent much of her life caring for the dying on the streets of Calcutta. This was very difficult work. She began each day by spending some time in the chapel before the Blessed Sacrament in prayer and adoration. "If I did not do this," she said, "I could not do what I do." Mother Theresa prayed in the chapel, just like we pray in our church today. But we can pray anywhere and anytime we wish for that matter. Not much spiritual growth happens without prayer.

Want to cultivate the garden of your spiritual life? Acquire a Bible if you don't have one. Begin reading the Gospels. By doing so, you will become acquainted with the way that God thinks and tap into the wisdom he is offering you. Read the lives of the saints; learn their secrets and emulate their zeal. We can also volunteer and do some community service like many of our young people are doing. Helping others is an extension of our life in Christ. We become the vine branching out into the world bringing the life and love of Jesus to others. Prayer, scripture reading, study, reflection and being merciful and loving toward one another: these are great ways to grow spiritually, but we must choose to do them. This requires some effort and work on our part. Beautiful gardens don't happen magically. They need lots of attention and care. The same is true of the garden of your spiritual life.

Perhaps, we are not as close to Jesus as we once were. We can always re-attach ourselves to Christ. Jesus turns no one away. Even after a long separation, the life of grace will begin to flow within us again once we return to him. We should never write anyone off, not even ourselves. It is truly amazing to see how quickly the spiritual life can revive. Jesus can give new life even to dead wood. Think of the cross. The dead wood of the cross bore him who is the life of the world. The Sacrament of

Reconciliation can help to smooth the way back into a renewed friendship with the Lord. Reconnecting with Christ will cause our spiritual lives to flourish once again.

Jesus' insistence that we abide in him is not only important to us. It is also important to Jesus. Think about it. What would a vine be without branches? What would it produce? If Jesus is going to be the life of the world, Jesus needs us too. Jesus wants to live in us, not just for our sake, but for his sake too. Jesus wants our spiritual lives to flourish. What is holding that back from happening in your life? What is it that may be draining you of energy and life? What are the sap-suckers in your spiritual life? Let the dead wood go. Better still turn it over to the Lord. The new growth will happen. It always does! Of course! Who else would think that but a gardener?

Father Neil