

## “Cleansed, Cut, and Fruitful”

By Rev. Elizabeth D. McLean, Prince of Peace Presbyterian Church

4-29-18

Based upon Amos 7:10-15; John 15:1-8

The cherry trees are blooming, the azaleas are starting to pop, and everywhere you look now there are signs of spring. Isn't it wonderful! One sure sign of spring is when you start seeing homeowners out in their yards and hear landscapers with leaf blowers working to make the lawns and gardens in our community as beautiful as the blossoming trees. There is so much to do after winter! Many of us have bumper crops of Sweet Gum balls littering our yards that have to be raked up, not to mention the downed branches and leaves from the many high-wind days we had this past winter. Then there is mulching to be done and pruning if you haven't already done it in late winter. Some people have no problem with pruning, as is evident from the number of Crepe Myrtle trees around town which have been hacked back so severely that they look to me like the fossilized legs of dinosaurs minus their bodies. But I have always had a hard time with pruning. I don't mind cutting dead branches off of plants, but this business of having to cut back live plants, like roses, always makes me nervous. I don't want to hurt them. In order to prune well, you need to know what you're doing, and I don't. So, I never cut back my roses quite enough. By mid-summer they are usually a wild and leggy mess as a result.

Still, as scary as it can be to cut and trim beloved specimen plants, I would much prefer to be the pruner than the prunee, and I suspect that whether you are a bold pruner or a timid one, you would too. That's why today's lesson from *John 15* can feel initially far more disturbing than comforting. The pruning shears are pointed at us! “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower,” Jesus told his disciples not long before his arrest. “[My Father] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit...” Nothing says divine love like the image of a giant pair of loppers descending from the sky and aimed at you, right? Not! Pruning sounds punitive and painful; it sounds like something we would just as soon skip. One can only imagine what Jesus' disciples thought when they heard this. They were already processing fear and sadness at the news that Jesus was soon going to leave them and be crucified. Then on top of that Jesus seemed to be telling them that suffering was in their future too, suffering caused not by the authorities, but by God.

Was Jesus really saying that God was going to hurt the disciples after he was gone? No. As I have said repeatedly, we know through Christ that God does not intentionally harm human beings to teach us lessons; God helps us when we are harmed. If God is our gardener, then God is the kind of gardener who goes out after a storm and looks at the damage it has done, and then gets to work cleaning the mud off of flattened limbs, staking bent stalks, and doing whatever else is necessary to help the garden recover. But as Jesus wanted the disciples to know, God is also the kind of gardener who knows exactly what needs to be done and understands that in order for plants to grow and be fruitful, even when the weather is good, they need regular maintenance. An unpruned plant is not nearly as fruitful as a pruned one. This is especially true when the plants are grape vines.

I do not know much about grapes or wine growing at all. Neither did Bruce Wilkinson, author of Secrets of the Vine: Breaking Through to Abundance, when he purchased some land in the country that happened to have grapes growing along one border with a neighbor. Wilkinson was excited to have his own grape harvest, so when he saw his neighbor outside going at the grape branches with a huge pair of shears, he was alarmed and ran out to meet him. “You don’t like grapes, I guess?” Wilkinson said, trying to break the ice graciously and conceal his distress at the same time. “Love grapes,” the man said as he hacked away at the branches. “Really. Well, I thought maybe we would be sharing the crop from this vine....” he said, wondering if it was already too late. The neighbor eyed his shiny shoes and said, “You’re a city boy, aren’t ya?” “Not exactly...” “Don’t know about grapes, do ya?” he continued. Wilkinson told him he liked the taste of grapes. “You like big juicy grapes?” he asked. “Of course.” “Well son,” he said, “we can either grow ourselves a lot of beautiful leaves filling up this whole fence line. Or we can have the biggest, juiciest, sweetest grapes you and your family have ever seen. We just can’t have both.”<sup>1</sup>

So began Wilkinson’s first lesson in viticulture. Wild grape vines tend to produce branches that grow all over the place. They grow leaves that block out the sun. They grow shoots that run along the ground and get covered with dirt, or end up too far from the vine to have adequate nourishment. The end result is a lot of leaves and a lot of branches, but not a lot of fruit. So if you want big grapes you need to clean and cut the branches, and redirect them in the way that you want them to go. Grape growing is high maintenance work.

“After I leave, this is what God is going to do to you,” Jesus basically said. “You have already been picked up off the ground and cleansed by the Gospel. Now be prepared for God to prune away all that is in you which keeps you from being really fruitful. You don’t need to be afraid or alarmed when this happens. It’s not a sign of God’s rejection, but rather of God’s caring presence. All you need to do is abide in me, remain in me, because I am the rootstock which will provide for you all that you need. No matter what happens to you, don’t let go of me.” There’s a play on words in the Greek in this passage that is lost in the English. The same word that means “cleansed,” *katharoi* in the Greek, also means “pruned,” when used in the context of gardening. So “as you were cleansed by the word,” Jesus was saying, “so you will continue to be cleansed/pruned by the Father to make you more fruitful.”

There are a couple important things to notice in this lesson as we try to process just what it means to be cleansed and pruned by God and the Word. The first is that this is not about being saved. Jesus said that God prunes those who are already “in him,” already attached to the vine. So, this is about becoming more faithful in our discipleship, not about avoiding the fires of hell, notwithstanding the reference to burning up the old dead branches in our lives. The second thing is that this cleansing or pruning God is going to do to us is not a punishment for failing to be faithful. Pruning is reserved for those who are already faithful. So, we must not confuse pruning with punishment or think of pruning as discipline. If we are pruned, that it a sign that we are on the right track, not the wrong one.

---

<sup>1</sup> Wilkinson, Bruce, Kopp, David, Secrets of the Vine Breaking Through to Abundance (Sisters: Multnomah Pub. Inc., 2001), 45-6.

Jay Garvin, a Commissioned Ruling Elder in our presbytery, told a story at a Presbytery meeting not long ago about how God had pruned him in this way. He gave me permission to me to tell it again here. A career engineer, Jay was not the kind of guy who felt called to evangelism or ministry. Just the opposite. When God called him to go into lay ministry it was during a time when his faith was pretty much at rock bottom because of issues he was having with his son, who was a drug addict. He was mad at God and bewildered and grief-stricken. But for some reason, instead of rejecting God completely in his pain, he turned toward God one day and vented all that he was feeling in prayer. To his surprise, God responded neither by reprimanding his unfaithfulness, nor by explaining his son's circumstances. God responded by telling Jay to go into the ministry.

Well, like so many who are called, Jay was not entirely convinced that that was a good idea. But in his mind he struck a bargain with God. "Ok. I will learn more about ministry, but I don't want to work with children or old people." Then he went to school and learned all he needed to learn academically to do ministry. He did well. But God had more in store for him. So, God got out the old pruning shears around the time Jay was doing his first field education placement and gave him a job at Woods working with old people doing pastoral care. After some reluctance, Jay learned how to be with the aging and dying, and grew in his faithfulness and the knowledge of his gifts. Then it was time for him to do a second internship. This time God sent him to Harundale Presbyterian Church to.... you guessed it.... work with children. When Jay was commissioned by Presbytery, he acknowledged that these experiences were not easy or always comfortable. But they made his ministry more fruitful. When he was asked what he would do after being commissioned, Jay said he was now content to stay and do children's ministry, since he didn't feel called to preach. Yet when I spoke to him this past week, he was at a seminar to help him with his preaching. You can't say after that, that God doesn't have a sense of humor.

I see that sense of humor in the Old Testament lesson today about Amos. Amos was a powerful prophet during the time before the exile when the vineyard which was supposed to be the people of Israel had gone wild and become a total mess. He was particularly focused on social justice issues in his ministry. Yet he was a very reluctant prophet and would not even acknowledge to the authorities who wanted to kill him because of his prophecies against them that he was a prophet at all. "I'm just a trimmer of sycamore trees," he insisted. Isn't that perfect? God called a man who pruned things for a living to be a prophet! God knew that Amos had the gifts to do the job of making Israel more fruitful because he understood the need for pruning. He just needed to learn how to trim people with God's word, instead of trimming trees with shears.

Not all pruning leads to a call to formal ministry, however. The goal of God's pruning is to make us all more faithful disciples regardless of what we do. Actually, since all of the "you's" in the text are in the plural, the primary goal in this lesson is to make us into a more fruitful faith community. Jesus wasn't talking about singling people out in this text. That's probably why John chose to include it in his gospel. His community was struggling with how to be faithful after undergoing an ugly ecclesiastical divorce with the Jews in the synagogue. The Christians had been kicked out. So, they had to let go of one understanding of being faithful and embrace a new one. "Don't cut yourselves off from Christ to stay in the old community," John wanted his

congregation to know. “Remain in the vine. Abide in Christ. We’re on the right track; we’re just being pruned as Jesus predicted we would be. Don’t panic.”

I wonder sometimes if perhaps the Church universal is being pruned right now. For decades people have been saying that the Church is dying, and there is no question that membership across denominations is decreasing. But a well-pruned plant can look like a dying one for a time, and the truth is that not all of the branches which called themselves Christian yet wandered too far from the vine were fruitful. Not all of them were grounded in the Word of God in Christ. As a result, there is a lot of small and sour grapes out there that have had a negative effect on the quality of the whole vintage. God may have recognized that a trimmed Church made of fewer branches which are closer to the vine may be more fruitful than the old, wild one was. The Church should consist of those who really care about serving Christ, not those who are attending only because it is the socially normative thing to do or because they want to get something from God. No one knows what the vintage of the Church at the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century will be like. But I wouldn’t bet that the vineyard will close before there is one. God knows what God is doing, and isn’t afraid of pruning. God cleans, cuts, and bends us out of love.

But even though the lesson was directed to the Church community, there is no reason we still cannot consider it individually as well. Have you ever gone through a pruning stage in your faith? Are you in one now? If you are feeling the pinch in a part of your life, or feeling pulled in a new direction, don’t assume that it is because you are failing or God doesn’t care. God may be lifting up the branches in you that have wandered off on the wild side, washing off those which have fallen in the dirt, and trimming off those that you either don’t need any more, or that are keeping you from being even more fruitful than you are. Cling to God, put your trust in God, and let the gardener do his work. You are not in charge of the process, but you can assist it by not resisting when God gives you opportunities to grow parts of you which are not yet flourishing, or asks you to let go of other parts of your life which need to be allowed to die.

Consider your branches. Maybe God wants to help you finally get rid of those that have taken you down a path of low self-esteem—the “I’m not good enough” branches. Perhaps the Word of God is telling you that God’s going to want to redirect the branches in you that have to do with how you spend your time, or use your energy. Keeping in mind that the fruits of the Spirit are “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control,” ask yourself if the growing pains you are experiencing have anything to do with nurturing any one of these fruits in your soul. God knows how to make each of us burst with the grace that so characterizes the vine which feeds us. We just have to hold on, trust, and grow.

In the 2004 movie, *Sideways*, two middle-aged men, both very much in need of pruning, take a vacation in California’s wine country. Paul Giamatti plays one of the men, Miles, a failed writer and high school teacher who knows more about wine than himself or life. He is obsessed in the movie with the kind of wine called Pinot. Finally, a friend he makes along the way named Maya asks him, “Why are you so into Pinot?” Miles says, “Uh, I don’t know. It’s a hard grape to grow, as you know. Right? It’s uh, it’s thin-skinned, temperamental, ripens early. It’s you know, not a survivor like Cabernet, which can just grow anywhere and uh, thrive even when it’s neglected. No, Pinot needs constant care and attention... Only the most patient and nurturing of

growers can do it really. Only somebody who really takes the time to understand Pinot's potential can then coax it into its fullest expression. Then, I mean, oh its flavors, they are just the most haunting and brilliant and thrilling and subtle... and ancient on the planet."<sup>2</sup>

I don't know much about wine. But it seems to me that if human beings were grapes, based upon Mile's description, we would be like Pinot. We need constant care and attention in order to grow into the potential within us. But the good news of the Gospel is that we have been given a vinegrower who knows our potential like no other. Our gardener is not afraid to give us the pruning we need, and is ever ready to pick us up and support us if storms knock us down. All we have to do is to make sure that we remain in the vine. It is the source of our life, our strength, our fruitfulness. When we abide in it and trust the work of our gardener, as individuals and as a community of faith, we can rest assured that we have all we need to grow and thrive. Thanks be to God! Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in *Animating Illustrations* from "How to Be a Branch", HomilecticsOnline, retrieved April 23, 2018 from [https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber/btl\\_display.asp?installment\\_id=93040454](https://www.homilecticsonline.com/subscriber/btl_display.asp?installment_id=93040454) .