

Want Fruit? PRUNE!!
John 15: 1-8
Don Lincoln

I heard a story not long ago about a parakeet whose owner cleaned its cage with a vacuum cleaner. The woman removed the attachment, put the hose in the cage and suddenly 'sssopp!' Sucked the bird right up.

The owner gasped, turned off the vacuum, and opened the bag. There was her bird – still alive, but stunned. She grabbed the bird, covered in dust and debris, raced to the bathroom, turned on the water, and held it there to clean off all the debris. When she turned off the water she realized the soaked creature was shivering, so she did what any caring bird owner would do. . . she reached for the hair dryer and blasted the bird with hot air.

A few days later, the friend who told me the story said she had contacted the owner to see how the bird was recovering. 'Well,' the owner replied, "Chippie doesn't sing much anymore; he just sits and stares."

I don't know about you, but whenever I hear language about pruning, and it's being spoken in my direction, I get nervous. I get the sinking feeling that something is going to be done to me that's going to cause me to not feel like singing much anymore either. Like the anticipation of a doctor visit knowing it's going to have something to do with needles. Makes me cringe.

"This is for your own good." Yeah, sure. Or my favorite, "This is going to hurt me more than it will hurt you." OK, then how 'bout we switch places?

But the fact of the matter is, if you know anything about certain plants, pruning is critical. The grapevine is clearly one of them. I know nothing about growing grapes, but I am acquainted with the fruit of the vine so-to-speak, and understand not only the terroir – the setting and the soil – are important – but that pruning the vines is essential. Pruning can mean the difference between a really nice cluster of grapes and the possibility of a good harvest, or ending up with hardly any fruit.

The first home I purchased was from a couple moving into a retirement community. They had no children, but the man's "babies" were his roses. I inherited a rose garden with 35 rose bushes. It only took one year for me to learn unpruned roses don't bear much good fruit. Left alone, a rose will get straggly and tangled, and grow in on itself. It will shade itself from the sunlight. It will blossom in quite a few not-so-good roses, rather than a lesser number of truly splendid ones.

So you have to prune it to stop it from wasting its energy and being unproductive. You prune the rose to help it be its best true self. It took a couple years to get the hang of it, but eventually I had a rose garden that produced a dozen lovely roses every few days throughout the summer. Amazing! Just because I pruned!

BUT – have you ever seen a novice prune a bush? They typically have one of two tendencies. They either end up with a tiny little handful of shavings, and a bush that looks absolutely unchanged, or a huge pile of brush next to a barren stump. Most of us don't do well with pruning – at least when we are novices. And it's the same in our lives – with discipline; or redirection; or instruction, or cutting back. Often pruning is not our gift – when it comes to others, we often take off too much – and when it comes to ourselves, we usually take too little.

Jesus makes it clear in this text that it's God who is the gardener – the Pruner – the Vinedresser. God – who is the one who knows more about the growth of creation than anybody else. God – who knows exactly what needs to be done in our lives to make us fruitful.

The image in this story is of God pruning with a purpose. Pruning for the best combination of quantity AND quality. Coaxing the vine to focus on doing something very well. It is the work of the vinedresser to help the plant focus its strength on producing fruit. Without pruning – left to its own devices, the vine would produce lots of beautiful foliage – vegetative luxuriousness – but no grapes. It has to be pruned to bear the fruit.

But how does this pruning happen in our lives? You and I know a set of heavenly pruning shears isn't suddenly thrust through the clouds to tidy us up.

One of the ways pruning takes place is to do exactly what Jesus tells us to do in this text. To abide in Him. To study His word. To know His life. To pray to Him. To follow His lead. That's what abide in Him means. To be so connected to Him that His ways actually start becoming our ways. And along the way, we – and others who are also focused on Him – are able to see and know and discern exactly what pruning needs to take place in our lives – individually and corporately – that we might bear good fruit.

That's exactly why the Christian life is NOT a solo proposition. It is not a go-it-alone, do-it-yourself way of being. As a grape on the vine, it's not lost on me that I'm not the only one here. Grapes are tribal.¹ They grow in bunches. So are the followers of Jesus. We need each other. Your growth has everything to do with mine, and mine with yours.

You and I need others who can see where we're getting a little out of line – where we're wasting energy in the wrong direction. Most of the time You and I can't see for ourselves what pruning needs to be done.

I remember my very first ministry pruning. I was in seminary, was home for the summer, and invited to preach in my home church. My very first sermon. I got in the

pulpit, and said, "Thank you so much for inviting me to be here today, for all the encouragement you continue to give me. Now listen to God's Word."

"I AM the true vine, said Jesus, and my father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so it can bear more fruit."

I caught the face of my older sister in the third row, who looked like she had gas, or was about to throw up. But I didn't let that disturb me, and stayed the course – for the entire sermon.

She waited afterwards until all the people greeting me at the door were out of earshot, and said to me "Don, cut the preachy stuff. You sound really stupid trying to SOUND like a preacher!"

You cannot imagine how grateful I am for her willingness to PRUNE me a little bit – and I'm guessing you CAN imagine how grateful YOU ARE that she did that!!

Pruning is what allows us to abide in what is essential. Pruning is necessary to bear fruit. Pruning is what keeps us focused, instead of scattered. Have you ever wondered to yourself, "Where do I need pruned, in order to more fully abide in Jesus?" My guess it would only take a few seconds for each of us could come up with at least one place we could use a little pruning.....

Am I too focused on myself? Am I too worried about success? Am I drinking too much? Watching too much TV? Working too many hours? Not abiding by good interpersonal boundaries? To live as Jesus calls, I must focus my energies on the things that bear fruit in my life, which means good fruit will be borne in the lives of those around me.

Is there too much leafiness in my life? Living in this little corner of the world, I have to ask myself, is there too much leafiness – do I have too much stuff? You and I know, chances are if we have a basement, an attic and a garage, we have too much stuff. Do I have too many toys? I do if they so consume me that I'm not bearing good fruit in the world, in the lives of others. Am I spending too much time majoring in the minors?

Patrice Stille – Westminster's childcare coordinator wrote this week's email column using the same passage we read this morning. Listen to Patrice's words to the parents of her Sunday morning charges in the nursery.

Picture this typical Sunday morning. I know....you just want to get your child out the door, somewhat on time, with two shoes on, hair brushed, presentable attire. This may sound unconventional, but do me a favor? Put those priorities aside for a moment and hear these words: JUST GET HERE. Think you're too late? A little church is better than none. Pajamas or halloween costumes? That's A-OK. Hair or teeth unbrushed? So what! And, this is a big one: kids dragging their feet, complaining or melting down? Even better. We handle all tantrums and tears. We are here to be your network, your village, and your relief. JUST GET HERE.

The 60 minutes that you dedicate to bringing your child to church not only changes the trajectory of their lives, but just as importantly, yours. Sincerely, it is a blessing to take your sometimes squalling child from your arms, with the hope that you can release, regroup and refresh with the word of God.

In John 15:5, we are reminded, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Our blessed children are part of our fruit. When you choose to abide in Christ by taking the time to worship, you are consciously nurturing your fruit, and we in the nursery are committed to supporting you in that endeavor.²

I started off with that parakeet illustration because this call of Jesus to "abide in me" – coupled with the pruning language can feel like a threat. You know what I mean? Abide in me or else – be pruned, wither, be thrown into the fire, and die! Like a threat to bully us into staying loyal and faithful.

But Jesus doesn't just say "Abide in me." Rather, he says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." And that changes everything. The statements about pruning and withering and fire are not threats of intimidation but rather statements of fact, descriptions of what happens when you and I do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from His love, His grace, His mercy, and His acceptance, when you and I run or hide or think we can do it on our own. Branches don't do well when separated from the vine.³

Jesus repeatedly uses the word "abide" to describe that relationship of the vine to the branches. Over and over in John's gospel, Jesus says to the disciples, "abide in me," which is also translatable as "Make your home with me" or "Stick with me" or "Remain with me."

You know what happens? Every time I see somebody connect to Jesus, it changes their life. He starts to mess with you. And He causes you to bear good fruit. Something about connecting to Jesus we can't help ourselves. A spirit of generosity, compassion and hospitality and welcome suddenly starts to ooze out of us. And the pruning doesn't even feel so harsh anymore. Because it means we are going to do better. We are going to bear more fruit – individually and corporately. It's the good news of this text. He wants us to be fruitful. And just by connecting to Him, we will.

May it be so. Amen.

1. Jim Marsh, *Inward/Outward* from Church of the Savior; "Grapes of God"; April 29, 2018.
2. Patrice Stillely, article in Westminster Presbyterian Church Weekly Update, April 26, 2018.
3. David Lose, *...In The Meantime*; Lectionary Reflections, April 24, 2018