



“The Gifts of God’s Pruning”

Texts: John 25:1-8, 1 John 4:7-21

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As a child, I liked watching my mother garden; mostly I liked watching what was grown, and one of my favorite things was the raspberries. My mother had planted a raspberry bush and it vined up a trellis, and I would watch her prune the bush. I remember the first time it died back; I was alarmed that the bush was dying. Of course, the next season it came back full and laden with berries. And that’s what I think about when I hear today’s Gospel lesson.

The scriptures read this morning focus on God being the gardener, Christ as the main part of the vine and we as the branches. There are times that we need to be pruned and that can be painful to think about, but we all need pruning from time to time.

The scriptures that were read this morning focus on two things that are intricately entwined: abiding in Christ and loving one another. For without abiding in Christ, we will never be able to fully love each other. In the period that John wrote, the early Christians were still in transition in mind set of worshiping Jesus while maintaining their Jewish roots. There were threats made by the Jewish leadership of excommunicating those believers who had turned to Jesus as their Savior and Lord. It was essential in the early church that community be formed and formed well; that the people would come to not just rely on one another, but to care for one another, to truly love one another, that that community could sustain whatever trials and tribulations came their way. It is in this context that these passages were written. The Gospel of John and the first letter of John provide us with essential insights into what it means to be community and, most of all, what it means to love.

In John's Gospel, the imagery of the vine and branches signifies the intimate relationship between God and God's people, a metaphor deeply rooted in Jewish theology. Jesus emphasizes the necessity of remaining connected to God, for apart from God, we can do nothing. This connection requires our full attention and the pruning of distractions that draw us away from God's presence.

The act of pruning, both on a communal and individual level, is crucial. In the early church, believers and their faith communities faced challenges and opposition, and to get through those challenges required a deep commitment to Christ. But has life really changed that much from the early days of the church? We may not be facing the judgment of Jewish leaders, but we also face challenges and opposition in so many ways in our lives today. It is important that we, too, be pruned so that we can abide in Christ and be fruitful in service to our Lord and Savior. Just as branches are pruned to bear fruit, we too must let go of anything hindering our connection to God and our ability to serve God's children within and beyond the church.

This word, abide, has such a deeper meaning than we embrace. The branches needed to be firmly attached to the vine to produce quality fruit, abiding in that main branch to get sustenance to grow strong and produce quality fruit. Perhaps because I'm a mother, the phrase 'abide in me' brings to mind the image of being nestled in the arms of God. Abiding in that peace, in God's light, in the generous and abundant love of God. Being fully in the embrace of God provides us with comfort and nurtures the spirit. It is in this abiding, in this closeness to Christ, that we can be fruitful.

The fruit we are called to bear encompasses qualities such as peace, patience, kindness, forgiveness, which are greatly needed if we are to love one another fully. But this fruit being produced also extends beyond personal virtues to action - actively seeking to end oppression, poverty, and discrimination, actively working for justice for those who have received none. But, the greatest fruit that God wants us to produce is love. Love is the root of our actions and attitudes; and this love is not the love that we normally think about, but a sacrificial love exemplified by Christ's selfless sacrifice for us.

The love described in 1 John is agape love, which is a love that surpasses mere words and actions. It is a love that compels us to forgive, compels us to reconcile, and compels us to have compassion towards one another, mirroring the unconditional love God has shown us through Jesus.

By abiding in Christ through prayer, meditation, and reflection on His Word, we allow God to prune and shape us for God's purpose. Our unity in Christ strengthens the church community and enables us to bear fruit that glorifies God.

I've probably told you this story before, but one of the churches I worked at in Florida had a Session that was completely dysfunctional. One of the issues was that they were not kind to one another. At Session meetings they would often talk unkindly to each other. When I would bring their attention to this behavior, their response was always the same. Oh, this person knows we're just joking. We're family. So and so knows we don't mean it. Yet what does that kind of attitude and behavior do to

strengthen the community of God or the outreach into the community? That kind of behavior does nothing to build up the community of believers and is a horrible witness to those who may visit and see this behavior. Love builds up. It never tears down.

Scripture tells us that if we can't be kind and loving to those we know, how then can we possibly be loving to those we don't know? 1 John tells us to love one another as Christ loves us. That is the key of how we are to love. Not with a superficial love that allows us to make sarcastic remarks about one another. Not the kind of love that when the going gets tough, you say, "I'm out of here". It's not the kind of love that when a conflict arises, you just walk away. It is the kind of love that looks for reconciliation when conflict arises. It is the kind of love that hangs in there, endures, when someone's problems, whether it be a health crisis, a family crisis, or a personal crisis, is lasting for an extended period of time. If our love for one another is to be like Christ's love for us, then we don't abandon the other person in times of crisis. We don't put down other people but are always looking for ways to build them up. Agape love is what Corrie ten Boom showed to those Jews she tried to rescue during the Holocaust. It is the love that Nelson Mandela showed by standing up to injustice and enduring years in prison. It is the love that Mother Theresa showed in her work in Calcutta.

You might be sitting there thinking that those people are exceptional, and most people, like me, are just average people, doing the best we can, loving the best we can. But a response like that makes me think of Mr. Rogers. After his death, his wife spoke of how annoyed she would get when people would make her husband out to be exceptional, because of the way he loved people and welcomed people in. But she said he wasn't exceptional, that he worked hard on letting agape love rule and letting go of hindrances that distracted him from being able to love and serve with God's agape love. It is work to get to agape love. It is choosing to love when the easier thing would be to walk away. It is work to forgive. It is work to reconcile. It is work to abide in Christ. It is work to stay connected with God through spiritual disciplines. But It is this deep abiding love that Christ showed us when he faced his death on the cross that God is trying to get us to through the pruning. That love that is so great that it would cause us to lay down our lives for another. It's not easy undergoing the pruning process. But it is necessary to help us to become the sons and daughters that God desires us to be. It is necessary because that love is needed in the work of God's kingdom on earth. That pruning is necessary to help us to learn to abide in Christ. And in that abiding we find peace and joy and most of all love that should permeate every part of our lives.

Let us reflect on what needs to be pruned from our lives, what changes we must make to abide in Christ fully, and how we should show gratitude to God for God's sacrificial love. Are we willing to love with agape love, even when it is challenging, and even when we are called to love those we find objectionable, unlovable?

As we strive to love one another as Christ loved us, may we remember that our calling to love transcends personal comfort and convenience. We are called to love and care for all God's children, regardless of their circumstances or background, even regardless of whether we like that person or not. Let us heed the call to love one another deeply, bearing much fruit for the glory of God.

May we follow Christ's example of love, abiding in Him, and being blessed and a blessing in our service to God's kingdom. Amen.

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