

The Fifth Sunday of Easter – 2021

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:1-21

John 15:1-8

Nobody likes to be pruned. In a weird, unholy way, all of us believe that we are a real-life Mary Poppins – practically perfect in every way. We have become a people that likes to be affirmed, commended 24/7, lifted up and celebrated. If others won't do it for us then we do it for ourselves. Nobody likes to be pruned.

Jesus knew a lot about horticulture, but His words from St. John are not really about grapes, not really about vines and branches, and a spring-time bonfire. His words are pretty important. Jesus has you in view. This is the Son of God, by the way, the Living Lord of Heaven and Earth who said these things. When He taught His disciples, He had more than just those twelve hombres in mind. He saw more than just the Upper Room on the night when He was betrayed. Yes, this teaching comes from that exact night. He had washed their feet. He had instituted the Sacrament of His body and blood. He had dropped the bomb on them that they would all basically fall away. Jesus teaches like One who see everything because Jesus sees everything – He sees you, today. This text is absolute proof that He understands you, understands the life of faith, understands the struggle you have with your sinful nature.

And He talks about you being pruned. No one likes it – it is discipline. Oh, yes, the Vinedresser disciplines you; young, old – doesn't matter. God disciplines you because He loves you. God's love for you is a paternal love that never changes. This extended metaphor is brilliant. It describes your life in Him, in Christ (it describes the union between Christ and His church). This extended metaphor is an interpretative device for you to understand life itself. Jesus says that He is the vine and His Father is the vinedresser. You are a branch. Believer that you are, you are a branch connected to the Vine. The Vine feeds you His life. The sap of vitality is in His body and blood, in His Holy Word, in the life of the church that is lived out here at Christ the King and in many other places literally throughout the world. If you are not connected to Christ, the true vine, you are dead. Disconnected from Christ, all that the dead wood is good for is the fire. Hell. That is where unbelief will find its eternal home; Hell. Ignore the vine, remove yourself from the source of life, and death is all you get. Hell; abide in Christ and His Word or you're in for it. That is just a little bit of perspective as you weigh the important things in life.

Pruned. This is a Vinedresser who is absolutely obsessed with the vine; He looks over it night and day. The Vinedresser spends untold hours attempting to get the most out of the branches connected to it. So, He prunes it. That is not all He does. Our God is not a God who only thinks about discipline, but it *is* a handy tool He uses; for your good; for the good of the world. Oh, it's not just you that He has in mind when He prunes you – He has your husband, your wife, your children, your neighbors, your co-workers, your parents in view – those who see your mug daily, those who interact with you, those who are dependent upon you and those upon whom you depend. Your fruit is for them. So, He prunes you; to make you fruitful; more and more fruitful.

Let's be clear – fruit is beautiful, fruit is good, fruit glorifies God and serves your neighbor. God is crazy about fruit. What is fruit? Chastity, sacrifice, patience, mercy, kindness, self-restraint,

honesty, bravery, love, defending the weak, humility, defending the truth, service to the community. The fount of fruit is the life of Christ – He is the vine; we are the branches. We love because He has first loved us. He took our nature. He laid aside His divine prerogatives and was born a man, fully. God became man that He might become the vine that feeds the branch of you (that you might be fruitful with His life). This man, who is truly God, died that you might be supplied with His life. This is love, love that is active in your life. Sacrificial love, self-giving love; you have produced this fruit. God is at work in you, Christ's life is manifest through your own, and you demonstrate to the world that you are a branch connected to the Vine. And God *still* prunes you.

You're not perfect, you know (now there's an understatement). None of y'all, including me, has arrived. We are on the Way. We *expect* to be pruned. If God doesn't discipline us, look out. The book of Hebrews says that it is the illegitimate children which a father doesn't discipline. Your baptism means that you are legitimate children, conceived by God's grace, born of the womb of the church, you are beloved of the Father – so He disciplines you, prunes you. Hardship, difficulty, pain, sorrow – yes, through those things. But the Vinedresser disciplines your heart through the word of the law, a word that convicts you and shows you what a rotten schlub you are. Sinner. This is a courtyard of sinners. Full of lust and greed and selfishness and arrogance and quick to justify your misdeeds, your hurtful words and actions. Sinner. Dead in trespasses and sins. You, beautiful branch that you are, you are a sinner. That doesn't make anyone happy. Your sins hurt people. God prunes off parts of your heart and mind that are counterproductive, those parts that violate His will. He cuts them off.

And the crazy thing is, you stick them back on. Repentant on Sunday, you are back to the same charade on Thursday. God prunes the sin from your branch on one day and you are relieved to be rid of it... for a time. Then, in an act of pure defiance, you stick it back on. Have you ever seen a gentleman with a bad toupee? That's what a Christian looks like who is continually putting back on the dead limbs of pride and arrogance which the Vinedresser prunes from our branch. How would you ladies like it if Pablo Picasso did your makeup every morning? That is what a Christian looks like who is constantly putting the dead limbs of the sinful nature back on, justifying in your mind what you know is wrong so that you can do it again. What God prunes is to stay off.

The Vinedresser is superb at His craft and you know it. You know that He has tended you in love, meticulously caring for the unique and wonderful branch that is you. Your life prompted the Father, the Vinedresser, to send His Vine, send His Son. Not to enjoy a sunny hillside in southwestern France, not to luxuriate in balmy Bordeaux country was the Son of God made man. He came to lay Himself totally open to the shears of the law. Whipped was He – to be fruitful for you. He was pruned by crucifixion – not because of anything He had done, but because God wills to save you, to retain you for Himself, to give you a home where there is no death, no grief, no pain – a home where the living fruit of resurrection is always in season. His blood flowed. The Lord Christ is the true vine and the sap of life was called from His body by nails, and that blood is where you are to abide. Jesus said: "Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him" (John 6:56). It was for your sins that He was cut. He bore the punishment you deserve. Forgiveness flowed from the Vine and that forgiveness comes to you in rich abundance. Now that is rare fruit – forgiveness. Divine, delectable, delicious fruit –

heaven's banquet – forgiveness full and free. All for you. It comes from Christ alone. He presents it to you here, in this Divine Service, where He serves you, giving you His love.

God is great at producing fruit. In you. For the world, for the benefit of those in your sphere, for those you love. Remember, the branch and the vine have the same DNA. You have the same DNA as your Lord. You have been cleansed, washed in His blood, and the fruit of His life is dangling on the branch that you see in the mirror. We love... because He first loved us and we abide in Him. God has given us of His Spirit; we abide in Him and He in us. God wants you to see your life through Jesus' words from the Gospel of St. John. God wants you to see your life aright. It is true – apart from Christ we can do nothing. But thanks be to God, the Lord Christ is risen from dead, lives and reigns to eternity, among us, in us. The fruit of His virtue is laden on the branch of His church. To God alone be the glory.