

March 5, 2017
Rev. Christine Tiller Bohn, Ph.D.
Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church, Greeneville, TN
Scripture citations from NIV (unless otherwise indicated)

John 15:1-8
Pruning

Today is the first Sunday in Lent. I don't know what you think about the season of Lent. I don't even know *if* you think about the season of Lent. But here it is. Six more weeks until Easter.

When I was a kid, the rhythms of the church year didn't really make any sense to me. It was just the way things happened. Easter follows Lent, which follows Christmas, which follows Advent. Just like Spring follows Winter and Winter follows Autumn.

In more recent years, however, I have more and more come to appreciate the wisdom of the church calendar and the ways that it calmly, quietly, and repetitively invites us to orient ourselves--and continually re-orient ourselves--from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ, from the priorities of the world to the priorities of Christ, from the misdirection of the world to the direction of Christ. Living in the midst of this world breeds confusion. The church calendar calmly, quietly, and repetitively invites us to re-focus on the clarity of the cross.

Of course, as disciples of Jesus Christ, orienting and re-orienting ourselves from the ways of the world to the ways of Christ should be a daily activity. But the reality is that most of us are easily distracted. Sometimes something happens that derails us completely. But even when nothing like that happens, the daily noise of the world beats away at us like a constant drip of water that doesn't seem to be doing much at all but gradually forges a canyon, slowly turning us from the way of the cross and gradually increasing the distance between us and the Lord who has made us his own.

Lent offers to interrupt the pattern. Lent offers us a jolt, a wake-up call, an invitation to shake the cobwebs off and re-focus on the cross and re-direct our steps.

One of the ways that the world tries to lull us into a fog of confusion and mis-direction is by convincing us that the whole point of living is to accumulate more...more money, more popularity, more food, more fame, more success, more information, more likes and more followers on our social media accounts. One of the ways that Lent invites us to re-orient is by whispering to us about less...less grasping, less rushing, less worrying, less comparing, less demanding, less striving.

Constant pursuit of more has a way of dulling our senses so that we do not hear our Lord's call. Constant pursuit of more has a way of weighing us down so that we are slow to respond to his call. Constant pursuit of more has a way of distancing us from our neighbors and our families and our brothers and sisters in Christ so that we are increasingly alone and isolated even in a crowd. Constant pursuit of more has a way of training us in the arts of counting and hoarding so that we must exert great will to extend the smallest token of compassion, forgiveness, and generosity and we then expect great applause.

Lent invites us to let go, pursue less, and make space for the Holy Spirit to re-claim us, renew us, re-shape us, and continue his work of conforming us to the image and likeness of our Lord. Lent invites us to unburden so that we can hear the Lord's call and freely respond. Lent invites us to unburden so that our relationships with neighbors and friends and brothers and sisters in Christ can grow closer and deeper. Lent invites us to unburden so that compassion, forgiveness, and generosity flow easily from our hearts and we no longer expect or desire anyone to notice.

John chapter 15 is part of a conversation Jesus has with his closest disciples on the last night of his life, but it seems to me that it very much relates to the invitation and the journey of Lent.

"I am the true vine," Jesus said, "and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."

I have never grown grapes, and I know very little about grape vines, so I did some research. I still don't know very much, but I learned a few things.

First, every resource I checked emphasized that pruning is absolutely essential to a healthy, productive grape vine. The biggest mistake that novice grape growers make is not pruning enough. Extensive pruning is especially important in the first three years of establishing a vine, but the pruning does not stop after that. Consistent pruning is required every year in order to have a healthy, strong, and fruitful vine. Pruning is absolutely essential.

Second, proper care of the vine involves removing shoots that do not contribute to the hardiness, vitality, and fruitfulness of the vine. Pruning also involves cutting back the shoots that remain. Let me say that again. Productive branches are pruned every year. Productivity is not a defense against being pruned; it is a guarantee of being pruned. Productive branches that are not regularly and consistently pruned very soon stop being productive branches. Without pruning, branches lose their vitality. Without pruning, branches become unhealthy.

Third, pruning needs to be done at the right time during the year. This takes some knowledge and experience, because there is not just one obvious, optimal time. It depends on conditions.

Fourth, pruning needs to be done in the right way. This takes some knowledge and experience too, to select what to remove and what to cut back. It is important for shoots to receive a lot of exposure to sunlight. Lots of sunlight leads to lots of productivity. Branches that do not bask in the sun will not produce very much.

Growing grape vines is not a passive task. The gardener needs to be attentive and involved. The gardener needs to know about climate conditions and soil characteristics. The gardener needs to know about all the different varieties of grape vines that might be in the field. The gardener needs to know each plant, its stage of growth and its exposure to sunlight. The quality of branches is much more important than their number. Heavy pruning produces the best quality of grapes.

Jesus frequently used stories and images to teach his followers. His stories conveyed more truth more powerfully than any simple list of facts ever could have. His word pictures conveyed more insight more persuasively than any simple list of adjectives ever could have.

Jesus used lots of different metaphors and similes to reveal the character of the Father. He is a farmer, for example. A landlord. An extravagantly generous employer of day laborers, a shepherd searching for a lost sheep, a woman searching for a lost coin, a father scanning the horizon for the return of his rebellious offspring, a man hosting a banquet.

No single metaphor says everything that can be said. Each metaphor reveals something special.

In John chapter 15, Jesus introduces the metaphor of vineyard: I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. You, my followers, are branches on the vine. The gardener cuts off every branch in the vine that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.

Consistent pruning is essential. Productive branches need to be regularly and consistently pruned...at the right time...in the right way. The gardener is attentive and involved. He knows the conditions of climate and soil. He knows all the different varieties in his vineyard. He knows each branch, its growth stage and its exposure to the light of the Son (S-o-n). The quality of branches is much more important than their number. Heavy pruning produces the best quality of grapes.

Pruning involves cutting off that which does not contribute to the hardiness, vitality, and fruitfulness of the vine—resentment, bitterness, fear, pride, mis-directed desire, unforgiveness, self-centeredness, rage, deceit, lust, coercive violence, manipulation, impurity, greed, slander... Every hurt we refuse to release weakens us, diminishes our fruitfulness, and endangers not only our own well-being as a disciple of Jesus but also the vitality of the whole vine. Every wrong attitude, decision, or action we refuse to confess weakens us, diminishes our fruitfulness, and endangers not only our own well-being as a disciple of Jesus but also the vitality of the whole vine.

Pruning also involves cutting back that which does contribute to the hardiness, vitality, and fruitfulness of the vine. Even our best qualities need to get tested to their breaking point. What is your best, most-Christ-like quality? It is not exempt from pruning. If you have patience, then your patience will be tested so that you will become more patient and so that you will not grow complacent or prideful. If you are gentle, then your gentleness will be tested so that your gentleness will withstand trials and so that you will not come to think that gentleness is rooted in your own goodness rather than God's grace.

The Holy Spirit works not only on our weaknesses, but also on our strengths. Often it is in our strengths that we are most vulnerable.

We are human beings, not plants. When we are cut, we bleed. When we are pruned, it hurts. I am quite confident that not everything that is uncomfortable is necessarily the gardener at work with his shears. There is much in this broken world that can cause pain, quite apart from the loving care of the Father. Nevertheless, I am equally confident that when the gardener is at work with his shears, it is uncomfortable and sometimes downright painful. For example, it is not easy to release a long-held resentment. It is perhaps even more embarrassingly painful when one of our good qualities is exposed as finite, limited, not fully Christ-like after all.

Pruning is not supposed to feel good. Pruning is supposed to fortify our resilience. Pruning is supposed to strengthen our vitality. Pruning is supposed to enhance our fruitfulness. Heavy pruning produces the best quality of grapes.

The quality of branches is much more important than their number. For years we in the western church have given more attention to numbers than to quality. Consequently both numbers and quality have suffered. Heavy pruning produces the best grapes...and the most grapes.

Spending time with Jesus, immersed in his word, accomplishes the pruning process. Simply hearing his words with our ears does not do it. Simply reading his words with our eyes does not do it. A daily 'quiet time' that has no particular impact on who we are on the inside and how we are on the outside does not do it. Effective pruning requires being immersed in his words...so immersed that Jesus—his words, his truth, his presence—fills our hearts and minds and surrounds our bodies. So immersed that Jesus—his words, his truth, his presence—shapes our attitudes and perceptions and decisions and actions...every moment of every day, in all sorts of situations, when we are intentionally being 'spiritual' and when we are working and playing and parenting, when we are all in one accord and when we are arguing, ...

No branch can bear fruit by itself. It must remain intimately connected to the vine from which it receives life. It must abide in the light of the Son.

"I am the vine," Jesus said. "If a person remains united with me—intimately connected to me, that person will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing."

Lent is an invitation to nurture our connection to the vine, to attend to the Gardener's pruning, to shake the cobwebs off, re-focus on the cross, and re-direct our steps.

Thanks be to God.