

Pruning and Abiding
John 15.1-8
Easter 5B
May 3, 2015
Elizabeth Mangham Lott
St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church

Margaret Atwood observed, "In the Spring, at the end of the day, you should smell like dirt." It has been a good weekend for such pursuits. If you weren't off at the fairgrounds listening to great music, I hope you have had your hands in the soil. There's still time today!

For weeks now Nathan and I have been rearranging growth in our little backyard just a little at a time. We've transplanted and repotted, weeded and uprooted. With every season, we know the space better and can imagine a better configuration for flower beds and tropical corners and herb containers. I am still adjusting to the planting rhythms of the coastal south. After a decade in the mid-Atlantic, I don't start preparing mentally for a kitchen garden until things should already be in soil here. So instead of using seeds and starting from scratch to grow tomatoes, we headed to Lowe's and picked up some plants already going strong. We have a little raised bed in our little 15 x 30 backyard, and we filled it with a mixture of soil and compost and other natural amendments. Before planting the tomatoes in that very rich soil, I peeled the bottom branches of the tomato plants off, tossed them aside, and then buried those ripped places below ground. I learned from my gardener brother that it's best to wound the plant a little bit before placing it in good soil, then you encourage growth to take off more quickly.

It helps to know a little something about the ways of agriculture, if only the backyard variety, when approaching our gospel text. Even if you don't know when it's time to prune a crepe myrtle or cut back azaleas that are getting too big for their space, you're at least likely to know that those practices exist. Part of encouraging the health of all kinds of gardens is in knowing how to control, maintain, and foster growth.

In John's Gospel, Jesus is telling us this is metaphorically true for people, too, and particularly for the group of people known as the church. Soil, light, location, weeds, fertilizer, old growth, new growth, all of it matters for the people of God.

In these weeks of Easter, we consider each Sunday a different aspect of being resurrection people; people pursuing together the way of Jesus and his promise of a life that is full. One challenge before us today is that the way to life, real life, abundant life, is through the way of death. Many months ago we talked about cultivating the ability to say "no", even saying "no" to good things, so that we might say "yes" to the best things. Perhaps with the metaphor of pruning, we consider the times a "no" seems to be happening *to* us or when we sense as a community that some practice or way of being has reached its end. One is a way of intentional choosing, the other seems to choose *for* us.

In Philip Kennesson's book, *Life on the Vine*, he writes of the church's need to assess its own health, saying, "Theological reflection that is of service to the church must be *bilingual*, speaking of both theological truths and cultural realities. To be able to speak only one language is to rob the church of the perspective it needs in order to sustain a faithful witness to the world. The church must always be prepared to make critical discernments about itself and about the wider culture in which it participates. Such discernments, when exercised under the guidance of the Spirit, help to prune the unproductive growth from our lives. Without good pruning, trees or vines use all of their available resources simply to sustain their network of branches. For this reason, the farther the branches grow from the main trunk or vine, the less likely they are to bear good fruit. Furthermore, as Jesus remarks in the Gospel, even the branch that is already bearing fruit remains a candidate for pruning, since such activity may spur the production of even more and better fruit."¹

For much of the 20th century, particularly in the South, church attendance was a cultural norm. In many cases, neighbors could walk to the church of their denomination, and most everyone attended. Church was a neighborhood gathering place, a place for kids to have an activity, a place for making good, law-abiding citizens, a place to feel better about life in order to brave the week ahead. This phenomenon was true for a while, then the decline began.

We know church has changed. As congregations everywhere talk about the shifts in culture and trends that challenge church growth, there is an undercurrent of lament. We are to grieve the changes, grieve the shifts, grieve the fact that church does not have the popular cultural standing it once enjoyed. But we know better. We are resurrection people who know that the way to real life must pass through the realities of death.

What if we understand trends and shifts and decline not as death but as pruning?
What if we get honest about the fact that many churches were largely social centers that were more formed around the way of popular, American culture than they were around the particular and peculiar way of the kingdom of God?
What if smaller faith communities make us agile, flexible, creative, and faithful?
What if cutting off the branch that was overly familiar with the dominant culture then enables us to be a bit subversive, a bit revolutionary, a bit critical of what our culture gets wrong?
What if the pruning of the church in the United States is allowing us to grow closer to the vine, sending our roots deep and bearing fruit that is healthy?
What if pruning strengthens our relationships because we discover we are connected to each other through the same Source?

We are growing in our understanding of what it means to be a connected people. Karoline Lewis challenges the lessons in autonomy and individualism that the church once taught, writing, "We are not the point. ...Without connection to a life source, abundant life is not possible...The bearing of fruit depends on dependence. It depends on connection. It

¹ Philip Kennesson, *Life on the Vine*, p. 31

depends on origin. It depends on belonging. As soon as you think you can produce anything from the basis of your own sovereignty, from your own efforts, from your own sense of independence, think about it. What kind of fruit will that be?

Because bearing fruit has everything to do with who you are in relationship. I wonder if this is what we tend to forget or ignore. That the manifestations of our faith are not individual expressions of our theological commitments and convictions but are deeply lodged in and arise from the communities of our lives. That there is truncated potential for faith embodied if we do not realize that the bearing fruit of our faith is premised on dependence."²

The benefit of metaphor is that it allows us to understand something concrete in a fresh way. The trouble with metaphor is that we want something concrete. We want a plan of action. We want steps to implement. We want to know what "bearing fruit" means. We want to know what growth looks like if it doesn't mean 500 people in Sunday School. The answer from our readings today helps us ever so slightly but ultimately wants us to let go of our action plans and replace them with a contentment of being. In fact, that's the answer: abide.

"Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

"So we have come to know and to believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and whoever abides in love abides in God, and God abides in him."

Life and growth and the "fruit" of our lives are wrapped up in the way we live and move and have our being. We abide in God. We abide in the ways of love. As much as we want a formula for a healthy life and a healthy church, the way forward cannot simply be studied but must be lived.

We think we understand the essence of Jesus' message because "We have heard hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of sermons and Bible lessons, read countless books, attended numerous seminars. Although there is nothing wrong with such activities, occasionally we forget that participating in them does not necessarily make us fruitful. We may simply be the wild, unpruned tree that continues to grow, but in a completely undisciplined fashion and with little prospect for bearing fruit. Or to switch metaphors," writes Philip Kenneson, "a person who simply attends regional agricultural conferences and sits in barn week after week studying farming magazines would not likely be mistaken for a farmer...Learning a little bit about farming and actually bringing good fruit to harvest may require radically different practices."³

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3605>

³ Kenneson, pp. 31-32

The real question to ask, I think, is not “how might we best grow” but “how might we best live?” I am convinced that the growth of the church in the 21st century is not about the language of adding to our numbers and expanding our territory but about loving God, loving each other, and loving the world in Jesus’ name. Our growth is about a partially way of being and living. And we will know we are on this way not by the numbers we count but by the stories we tell.

This shift in understanding will transform our personal lives, too. Instead of the goals of success, climbing the ladder, and publicly acknowledged accomplishment, we’ll begin to talk about growing in the practices of prayer that centers us, community that nurtures us, the lessons learned from seeking to be people who love all, and ways of being that slow us down and give us life. I will begin to understand that my growth is wrapped up in your growth, and you will begin to understand that your growth is wrapped up in mine.

Together, we grow in awareness that we are linked to God, and that means we are linked to love. In this growth we discover the life that Jesus repeatedly described. That means we will treat each other differently when we suffer, when we disagree, when we face challenges and difficulties. In all things, we respond in love because we know we are connected by the same vine.

This love will reach the far corners of the earth as we respond with love in Nepal, in Bali, in Baltimore, down the street at the Audubon Charter School. But we are only able to truly love in those ways and in those places because of how we love right here in this place and right here at this table.

We come to this table in love.

We come to this table making ourselves available for pruning.

We come to this table aware of the death that we carry and releasing it in exchange for life.

We come to this table to forgive each other and to be forgiven.

We come to this table to be reminded of the breadth and length and height and depth of the love of God.

We come to this table to remember who we really are.

We come to this table to abide in God’s love.