

Sermon

Easter 5B 2024 April 28, 2024

John 15:1-8

I am not a gardener, or an arborist, or florist, or anything to do with growing plants. In addition to getting my mother's sense of humor, I also got her ability to kill almost any plant I'm responsible for. So I have trouble relating to this particular passage from John.

My grandmother, my mom's mom, on the other hand, could make almost anything grow. There were times she would come visit and see a plant my mom was trying to grow and she'd take some pruning shears and start lopping off branches. "Betty," she'd say, "you just have to cut all these extra branches back and it'll be fine." Sure enough, the plant would grow better than my mom could ever get it to grow. My mom would try that, and the plant would die.

From the gardener's point of view, pruning is both necessary and effective. It's necessary because, without pruning, a plant may grow without control. It may intrude on the territories of other plants and take up valuable resources. And plants that grow where we don't want them are called weeds.

Pruning is also effective because it keeps the plant a manageable size as well as encouraging it to produce more fruit. Pruning maintains a plant's health, encourages flower and fruit production through stimulation and access to light, and it helps rejuvenate old or overgrown plants.

Not being my skill set, I have to trust the information I found as to why pruning is good.

But have you ever thought about this from the plant's point of view? Does the plant ever think (if it could think) that having parts of its body cut off is a good thing? Does it appreciate the fact that having one or more of its limbs lopped off will help it in the long run? Does it ever think that being stopped from uncontrolled growth is a good thing?

Sometime in the spring of my final year of seminary I was walking through the main building and encountered a group of prospective students touring the campus. The tour leader stopped me and said, "Todd! Would you tell the group what your

experience of seminary has been like?” Nothing like being put on the spot, and nothing like trying to come up with a 30-second example that reflected three years in seminary.

I thought for a few seconds and then I said, “Being in seminary is like being a rose bush. You show up and you are rooted in your beliefs and those beliefs have allowed for a few roses to grow in various places. But then seminary begins lopping off your branches and cutting away your flowers until you are cut down to your core. Eventually you begin growing again, and because you were cut back, what grows is more full and more productive than you could have imagined when you first got here.”

We are the plants – we are the branches and we have produced good fruit. We have produced that good fruit because we abide in Christ. That is certainly good news. But because we have produced good fruit, the time of pruning might be near.

As my seminary story pointed out, pruning can be painful. Pruning might lop off things or thoughts and ideas we think are important and hold dear. But if we are open to it, if we see pruning as necessary and effective, then we will produce more and better fruit than we have done so previously. Pruning could even be seen as a form of resurrection; or, if not resurrection, resuscitation – both of which are instances where the dead, the pruned, the wounded, are given new life.

What might need to be pruned I can't yet say. Maybe it's something that challenges your understanding of Scripture, allowing you to see in a new way. Maybe it's a realization that something we've always done needs to change so we can do something new. Maybe it's a slight change to something existing so we can do it better. Maybe it's coming to terms with knowing everything has a life cycle, and it's time for a particular thing to end.

When I came out to meet with the Search Team, I was told that Saint Luke's is on the verge of doing something new, but nobody knew what that thing was. We are on the verge of something new. We are on the verge of being pruned, on the verge of being cut back, so that we can produce more fruit.

From the point of view of the plant, pruning is a painful process. As we move forward, as we work to discern where and how God is calling Saint Luke's to serve in Buffalo, and maybe beyond, we need to avoid the temptation of looking at pruning

as what we have lost. Instead, we need to look at pruning with the hope and excitement of envisioning what we will gain.

May we continue to abide in Christ the vine so that we continue to produce fruit. And may we envision the pruning process not from the viewpoint of the bush who mourns the loss of limbs lopped off, but with the hope of the gardener who sees it as a way to keep us healthy and productive.

Amen.