

## **Prepare to be Pruned**

### **John 15:1-8**

I have a confession to make. I am a poor gardener. It's not that I can't afford to buy seeds or plants, tomato cages, and plant food. No, I'm just not that good at doing those things that make for happy and healthy plants. Take the peas that are currently growing in the raised bed behind our house. The instructions on the seed packet tell you that as the plants begin to grow, they are to be thinned to allow ample room to spread out and receive nourishment from the soil, sun, and rain. But I just can't bring myself to pluck up those little green guys, just because they are getting a little too close to their neighbor. I am risking a poorer harvest because the plants are a little overcrowded. The same goes for our shrubbery. We have some really nice flowering bushes at the front of our house. Year after year they grew unencumbered because we did not do any maintenance on them. Sadly, those shrubs after several years started looking rather shabby. Long and leggy stems, sparsely covered in leaves and flowers were more eyesore than eye candy! Rod and I had to admit that those bushes were way past due for a "haircut"! After a good pruning, those bushes are looking quite lush as they push out new foliage on their shortened limbs.

If my plants could talk, I wonder if they would ask that I not cut off those leggy stems? Perhaps our conversation would sound like this:

Me: Okay bush it's time for you to get a haircut. You are looking pretty shabby these days.

Bush: Please don't! It took me a long time to grow these limbs so long. I know they don't look as good as they used to, but I'll try to do better next year.

Me: But it's already been several years, and your limbs just keep getting thinner and shabbier. They hardly produce any of the pretty flowers that you promised us when you were first planted. It's time we do something to help you look and feel better.

Bush: I'm know I'm not going to like it but do whatever you think is best.

Let me ask you, have you ever had a conversation with God that sounded like that?

In the discourse with the disciples from the Book of John, Jesus likens himself to a vine and God a vinedresser. Those who called themselves disciples were the branches that grew from the vine. As any good gardener knows, for the plants they tend to look and produce their best, pruning is not a luxury but an absolute necessity. As the branches grow farther from the vine, they can grow thin and twisted, producing poor or even no fruit. If Jesus' mission in the world was to continue as God had planned, the disciples would need to remain close to Him, the good vine. This would require some special pruning.

As we think about the disciples, what kinds of things would need to be “pruned” for them to be successful? Being human, there would be plenty that could be pruned! James and John had already sought to be elevated above the others, so pride would need to go. Sword-brandishing Peter certainly showed signs of needing some anger management work. Thomas had his doubts which could hinder his future work as a disciple. In each of us there are traits and habits that are not befitting children of the King, and we, too, would benefit from some holy pruning. Will we be happy about it? Most likely not unless we can keep in mind the reason for the pruning.

Each of us, I’m sure, can think of a thing or two about ourselves that could be a hindrance in our efforts to witness on behalf of Christ. For some it’s shyness. How can you witness when you can’t summon the words to say to someone? For someone else, it may be that they are very brash. Not everyone is going to warm up to what that person has to say because they can come on a bit strong. No doubt there are some who feel they are too old or too young, to do any good in God’s kingdom. Maybe some are dealing with a lust for power, money, or fame. There are any number of human ills that can hold us back from fulfilling our purpose as disciples of Jesus. All these traits and attitudes are things that God can prune from us.

I recall a gentleman that was a resident at Souderton Mennonite Homes when I was the activities coordinator for personal care. Lester was a

very quiet, almost withdrawn person, a really nice guy, just never spoke up for himself. One day we did an activity where we wrote things that we wanted to give over to God and then put them inside balloons. We couldn't release the balloons, since that's not good for the environment, but we did present them, symbolically, at the podium in the auditorium that serves as the chapel at SMH. About a week later, Lester came to me to say that the activity had been a success for him. He had asked God to "prune" his shyness and when given the chance in a resident meeting he had stated his peace, without fear, something he had never done in his 80-plus years of life.

I realize not all of us are going to willingly ask God to prune us of those things that stunt our growth as His servants. One reason is that we ourselves may not even be aware of what it is that is holding us back from bearing the type of fruit that God created us to bear. That is why we need to abide in the vine, stay close to Christ, because there is much we don't know, but God does.

Jesus said our need to stay close to the vine is that it would be impossible to do anything good without him. But we might question that thinking since as we look around us, we can see many wonderful things that people have done. Many great works of art have been created by men and women. Architectural wonders have been constructed. Medical "miracles" have been discovered that can cure many dreaded diseases. Even everyday human beings have done great

acts of mercy and love. Just read your news feed to see what people have done and are doing during the pandemic to help their fellow man. Yes, good things have been done and will be done by people, many of whom do not accept the claims of Christ. These “good things” are not what Jesus was talking about when he addressed the disciples.

Jesus was talking about Kingdom work. The disciples would not be able to do anything worthwhile for the Kingdom, except through their relationship to Him. If they grew away from Christ and His kingdom, their effectiveness would wane, and the kingdom would suffer. Just as the branches need to remain close to the vine to draw nourishment, so the disciples, and we today, need to stay close to Christ in order to do any good thing for the kingdom of God.

The word to the disciples is a word to us as well, that any branch that does not bear good fruit will be cut off and thrown in the fire. For a physical branch that means it will be reduced to ash. For us as humans it means that our eternity will be spent in the fiery lake foretold in the Book of Revelation.

With that in mind, let's concentrate on the good fruit we are being asked to produce. Just what is the good fruit that Jesus wants us to produce with His help? Galatians 5 gives us a detailed list of those fruits. They are:

<sup>22</sup> ... love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, <sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control.

There is much work to be done to build the Kingdom of God here on earth today. We are called to be the branches that, having been nourished in the Spirit, give witness to the vine that is Jesus. The Spirit that is the vinedresser will prune us to promote good growth and abundant production. So, this morning, let us be prepared to be pruned, each in our own individual ways, all for the glory of God and His Kingdom. AMEN

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