

May 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2021

Acts 8: 26-40; Psalm 22: 25-31; 1 John 4: 7-21; John 15: 1-8

Easter, 5, b

In our gospel today, we hear Jesus say that in order to bear fruit, that is the love of Christ, we must be in relationship with Christ, and we must be pruned. I think I have some idea of what it means to be in relationship with Christ, but not so sure about what it means to be pruned. Jesus does go on and say that God prunes us to make us bear more fruit.

I looked at several translations of the verse on pruning. One translation reads that God has pruned us back so that we will bear more fruit. Another translation says that God trims us so that we will produce even more fruit. Finally, another translation puts it bluntly, God prunes what does not bear fruit in us, so that we can bear more fruit.

There is an article written by Melissa Earley, pastor of First United Methodist Church of Arlington Heights, IL, that gives a good illustration of pruning and bearing fruit. I'm going to tell her story as I believe it applies to all churches, including ours, and also to all Christians in relation to their personal lives.

Pastor Earley had been appointed to be pastor of a church because of her leadership skills and her creativity and energy. She was told that she had the potential to help make this particular church bear fruit. Right now, it was stagnant, not growing, and in decline.

Pastor Earley participated in a two-year program on congregational development that gave her all kinds of ideas of how to work with the congregation to help turn them around to be a growing, developing church. She said as pastor, she tried many of the ideas she learned in that two-year program. She stuffed visitor mugs with packets of hot chocolate, tea and a cheery note inviting visitors back. She encouraged members to bring friends. She held neighborhood movie nights. And she got to know the community through her involvement organizing for better schools.

Pastor Earley said that they grew some, a few members here and there, but certainly not in proportion to the effort she and her congregation had exerted in trying to grow bigger and better. She said she read church growth books that promised if they first addressed their weak areas, then focused on their strengths, and finally just refuse to die, then they would grow. She said these books often quoted the gospel we read today, of Jesus as the vine and the congregation as the branches bearing fruit. She said, as she and the congregation kept

plodding along with little results, they reflected that there was nothing wrong with the “vine”, which is Jesus, but something was not going right with the “branches”, that is, their church, their congregation.

Pastor Early went to a good friend who also was her mentor and asked him, “What’s wrong.” He simply told her to stop reading all those books and going to all those conferences, and look within, within her and within the congregation. This is when the pruning began, she said, the cutting back of ministry that was not helpful, followed with the enhancement of what they did do well. She did stop reading all those books and the church stopped promoting this and promoting that to try to get new members. She said once they began to look within, she and the congregation, began to see all their already existing strengths. They also began to change their perspective from growing their church, to bearing the fruit of Christ, to bearing the fruit of the gospel, God’s love and inclusion.

On their assessment, the pastor and the congregation began to see how the members of the church genuinely liked each other. The members had a deep history of supporting each other through difficult times. They also forgave the more difficult people their faults. Members took people who had stopped driving to doctor appointments, and no one grieved without a freezer full of casseroles,

she said. The pastor said that they did not have a lot of church-sponsored *mission* programs, but church folks were involved in *ministry*. A faithful group provided the meal at a local soup kitchen once a month. The congregation rallied around two boys whose single mother was overwhelmed. One member invited the two boys to dinner once a week. A retired army captain made sure they got haircuts. The congregation celebrated the improved grades of the two boys by having a little party after church.

Pastor Early said as they looked at themselves, they realized that they were not a dying church. They were a small church, but it was a church that was bearing fruit.

Pastor said she had been hearing the words of Jesus in our gospel today as a threat. That is, if they did not bear *enough* fruit, it meant that they had become disconnected from the vine and would be tossed and burned. Now, she said, she read Jesus' words as a promise. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit."

Pastor Early said that they may not bear the kind of fruit that's bragworthy at church conferences or in ministerium's that she attends where many churches receive praise for what they are doing. But with the Spirit strong and active within their midst, she and the congregation are bearing fruit, not only in their own individual, unique, way, but in the way and in the name of Jesus.

Amen,

Pastor Scales