

Fruitful

Rev. John Allen

There is an absolutely massive rhododendron bush between the church and the parsonage where I live. When we moved in, it loomed over the driveway, almost forming a sort of half tunnel that you would need to drive through in order to pull a car in.

Up top, it was complexly surrounding some wires, running into the house.

And in the middle, where you might expect, or want it to be the most bushy. It was hallowed out. Just a cavern of dead leaves and thick branches.

Now I do not really know much about taking care of plants, but I did know that this one needed to be pruned. If not for the plants sake, at least to keep it from blocking the entry to our house in a few years.

I am sure that much of my pruning has been inartful. I have tried to just do a little bit each year so as to not stress the plant too much.

But last year, it bloomed more fully and beautifully than it had in years. And this year, all of a sudden, that dead empty patch is filling in with fresh green shoots.

Not only is our driveway unobstructed. But the plant, best I can tell is thriving.

Now unlike me, most of the people Jesus spoke to during his life did know how to take care of plants. In many cases, their lives depended on it.

So they would have known better than I the importance of pruning.

Of course Jesus is not talking about rhododendron, but a vineyard, and grape vines.

"I am the vine" Jesus says.

"You are the branches."

"God is the vineyard keeper."

And then he adds this, "and you have been pruned, by the word I have spoken to you."

So in this image Jesus is giving us two important lessons about how to be fruitful. How to live lives that bear the fruits of love, and grace, and peace, and mercy into this world.

First, we have to stay connected to the vine. We must keep ourselves rooted in the Christ, our source.

Although this sounds so simple, it can be the hardest thing in the world to do. Our lives are all a cacophony of things that are competing for our attention, and things that are competing for our devotion.

And most of these things make promises they cannot fulfill. Nothing we can buy or indulge will nourish our spirits. The only thing that can do that is our vine. Rooting ourselves, in prayer, in quiet, in stillness, to the source from whom all blessings flow.

We have to stay connected to the vine.

And second, we have to get pruned.

This one is perhaps harder to accept. But our life of faith also imposes healthy limits on us. Our faith cuts back wily growth that may be flourishing, but is fruitless.

Our faith trims our ambitions so that they do not impinge on the needs of others.

God, our good vineyard keeper, sometimes cuts us back, not out of anger or vengeance, but to help us grow in the ways we truly need to grow in order to bear good fruit for this world.

For me, this image fits well with the season of pandemic life we find ourselves in now. I suspect many of us have had our lives cut back, perhaps sharply, during this past year. Age old, familiar branches now bear the marks of fresh cuts.

And now, with vaccines in our veins, and warm weather returning, we might start to feel that first flush of spring nutrients in our roots. Feel our winter-weary bodies warming to life once more.

And I expect that many of us might find some surprising tender shoots, springing up in surprising places.

New opportunities. Clarified relationships. New habits we don't want to lose. Or a clearer sense of what is most important to us.

I don't want to be heard saying that every bad thing that happened to us this year is just an opportunity for something new to grow.

Some of our wounds are not the skillful cuts of our good vineyard keeper. Sadly as we all know too well, sometimes life comes with senseless wounds inflicted by malice, irresponsibility, or misfortune that is beyond our explaining.

I know that too many of us have had significant parts of our lives, cut away by this pandemic in ways that feel simply cruel.

But, I also suspect that most of us can feel ourselves to have been pruned in this time as well. Something cut away to make way for something new.

And I do know that God has a dream for each our lives, that fits into a greater-still dream for creation. And I do believe that some of these new tender branches of our lives will bear the fruit upon with the future depends.

So let's enter this season of re-emergence ready. Let' ready our selves by rooting our selves to the true vine, not tethering ourselves to things that cannot fulfill us, but linking our lives to the source of all good things. In prayer, and stillness,

And then let's feel our new shape after these long months. What has been cut back? What is growing in new and surprising ways?

I want to close by sharing a poem that I have been reading almost daily for the past several weeks. It is written by Sarah Are, and it is called "The Light at the End of the Tunnel"

We can feel it coming– The change, The great return.

For a year now we've been begging God for the
Light at the end of the tunnel, shouting to God from the depth
Of that hole—"Do you hear us? We have lost a year! There is grief here!"

And God has been mostly quiet,
Speaking through essential workers,
And the persistent sunrise,
But recently, we can feel it coming–

God's answer, The light at the end of the tunnel, The great return.

And I should probably be running Full steam ahead,
Kicking the dust off of this
Year-long tunnel,

But instead, I find myself Wanting a moment To sit at the edge with you.

It turns out, Even though I thought All was lost,
I found Bits of myself, And bits of love, Here in the dark.
So before we are blinded by the light
Of that great return sky,
I want to know,

From here in the hole–
What should we keep?

What should we let go of?

Are we going back or Are we starting new?

We can feel it coming.

Change is in the air.

What will you take with you?