

**Pruned to Bear More Fruit
John 15:1-8**

**Dranesville UMC
Sunday, May2, 2021**

Candi and I often walk the neighborhood near the church. In the past few months, we have noticed a lot of trees which have been drastically cut back. To say they were simply pruned would be to put it mildly. All that was left of these trees were their trunks and a few feet of the main branches off the trunk. I would not have been surprised if the trees could not survive.

To the contrary, we are starting to see buds on the ends of the limbs of some of the trees. While it will certainly take a long time for these trees to return to the fullness they once had, I have no doubt they will be as full as before and possibly more so. It's obvious that the arborists or whoever trimmed those trees knew what they were doing.

I have said before on several occasions that I know absolutely nothing about gardening. Until all the health warnings came out, I often claimed that my favorite tool for yard work was a jug of Roundup. Now I use the organic stuff; but I have to tell you, nothing did the job like Roundup. The problem is that I usually can't tell a weed from a useful plant.

In today's Gospel Lesson Jesus uses imagery of caring for a vineyard. He describes himself as the "true vine." This is the final of seven "I am" sayings in the Gospel of John. Jesus would say, "I am...the good shepherd...the gate...the way, the truth and the life...and several other expressions which were intended to help his listeners understand who he is. Unfortunately, most of his listeners had no idea what he was talking about.

This particular passage is set within what is known as Jesus' Farewell Discourse. Most of Chapters 13-17 of John describe Jesus' final instructions to his disciples prior to his arrest, trial, and crucifixion. He is seeking to prepare them for life in his absence.

When Jesus identified himself as the vine, he also identified God the Father as the gardener or vine dresser. The gardener is constantly inspecting the vine to see

which branches bear fruit and which ones don't. Those which do not bear fruit are cut off. Those which do produce fruit are pruned in order to bear more fruit.

Once again, as someone with no knowledge of gardening, I could probably pretty easily figure out which branches were dead or were not producing. Getting rid of them would be no problem. I would have trouble with the ones bearing fruit. When should they be pruned? How much? How much is too much? I would be concerned that I either wouldn't prune enough to make the branches truly fruitful or that I would chop off so much that I would damage or kill them.

Jesus makes another statement which I could easily understand. Any branch which is separated from the vine can bear no fruit on its own. That one requires no explanation.

Jesus was making the point that his followers needed to remain with him, the true vine. As long as they did so, they would be pruned and cared for in order to bear fruit. This doesn't mean the disciples will have an easy time. Eleven of the Twelve disciples would remain with Jesus. They would all be tested and pruned; but would grow in the process. Peter, for example, went from being a coward who denied Jesus three times on the night he was arrested to a bold proclaimer of the gospel on the Day of Pentecost and beyond. Peter and the others would stand courageously before the Jewish religious authorities and testify to the gospel. According to Church tradition, all of these men, with the exception of John, would die violent deaths because of their witness to Jesus. Though painful, pruning has a positive intent - more fruitfulness.

One disciple, Judas Iscariot, did not remain with Jesus. He chose to betray Jesus to the authorities and later perished by committing suicide after feeling great remorse for what he had done.

This passage speaks to the Church through the centuries. It can be a guide and a warning for denominations, congregations and individuals. Those who remain in Christ will be pruned; but will bear fruit. Those who do not will be cut off.

This is a passage which pertains to believers. The emphasis is not on whether salvation is lost or not. This is about those who believe being able to bear fruit to varying degrees.

Talk of the presence or “abiding” of Jesus is not meant for a community at rest, that has settled for business as usual; but for a community engaged in service, a community whose distinctiveness from the world may evoke the world’s distrust, and even hatred.

There were a number of images in the Old Testament where Israel was referred to as God’s special vine. The historical character of what Jesus was saying would not be lost on the disciples.

This concept of remaining in Jesus, the vine, is open-ended. Abiding in Jesus entails a constantly renewed commitment. We should not try to limit our concept of pruning. It may take many forms.

While this concept of pruning can be applied to communities - congregations, denominations and other groups - we can also apply it to ourselves. What I’d like to do now is describe some of my journey into the ministry and several of my experiences since I began serving congregations. My intent is to show how I think pruning was evident over the years. As I do this, I hope this will give you a chance to reflect on the learning and growth, some of it painful, that has occurred in your lives. You may also have a chance to see where you’re being pruned even now.

As many of you know, I transitioned from a career in the Marine Corps to the ordained ministry. This began with mandatory retirement from the Marine Corps after twenty years’ service because I failed to be selected for promotion to lieutenant colonel. Leaving the naval service, which was all I had known since I was 18, was hard. There were many things I had to leave behind; things that were pruned away.

We moved to Durham, NC, where I began my three years of study at Duke Divinity School in order to obtain a Master of Divinity, which is required for ordination in The United Methodist Church. We were surrounded by civilians. The nearest military base was 70 miles away. I felt like a fish out of water.

While Duke Divinity School is probably the most conservative of the 13 United Methodist seminaries and theological schools, I would describe it as centrist. As the dean told us on our first day of orientation, neither conservatives nor liberals would be perfectly happy. That was intentional. We would all have to put aside

our perspectives and open ourselves to other points of view. For someone who leans conservative, that was some pruning. It wasn't as drastic for me as for those who were staunch liberals or conservatives. For several, it was more than they were willing to do.

From ages 18 to 42, I had never worked for either a civilian or a woman. In my first academic year, I was assigned to a field education placement at a local, small-membership church. The congregation was built around three or four families who had been there since it was established. Growth happened when one of the members married an outsider. The pastor, who would be my mentor and supervisor, in addition to, obviously, being a civilian, was a woman. More pruning. Dolores, the pastor, taught me a great deal about visitation and interaction with parishioners. She also shared with me about her experiences as a pastor in a part of the country in which women clergy were not especially welcome. That was enlightening. More pruning. I should mention that our daughter Heather served that church for a couple years shortly before moving to the Nashville area to work at Discipleship Ministries. The congregation was more willing to have a female pastor by then, thanks to the work Dolores had done. They had gone through their own pruning.

While at that first congregation, Candi, Heather, and I had a chance to go gleaning for the first time. In that case, it was sweet potatoes. There is only one way to glean sweet potatoes - on your knees, digging with your bare hands into just below ground level to find those the pickers missed. This was my first time working with the Society of Saint Andrew. It wouldn't be the last. I started to learn more about food insecurity; something that has been a focus of mine ever since. More pruning.

The next year found me at a different field education placement, where I would remain for an entire year. At this congregation, I was assigned to be the youth leader. Candi worked with me, while Heather, who was a senior in high school that year, was in the group. While I had helped with youth ministry in the past, this was my first experience at being the leader. More pruning.

In that congregation, Julia, the pastor's wife, who is herself a pastor, was the Director of Operations for the Society of Saint Andrew in North Carolina. I learned more about food insecurity from her.

Once again, Heather and I had similar experiences in the same congregation. She would serve this congregation as their field ed intern for two years while she was a student at Duke Divinity School.

The following summer, I participated in clinical pastoral education (CPE) as a chaplain intern at Duke University Medical Center. This was a time, not only of learning about ministry in a hospital setting, but learning and growing personally through participation in groups designed to help us deal with and shed any baggage we may have brought into our preparation for ministry. That was some serious pruning. Specifically, this was when, from an emotional standpoint, I finally retired from the Marine Corps.

My last academic year was spent at a new church plant which was about five years old. I learned a lot about the challenges of that type of setting, while leading the youth group, teaching confirmation class, and leading a home-based Bible study for the first time. Through that Bible study I discovered how much I enjoyed teaching adults and passing on what I had learned about the Scriptures while at Duke. The opportunities to teach have probably been my greatest joy in ministry. More learning and growing resulting from pruning which had already occurred.

I won't go into great details about the churches I have served since divinity school. I will say that my last appointment, Lincolnia UMC, was very challenging. It was my only experience with cross-racial and cross-cultural ministry. When I arrived there, having learned what I thought I needed to know at my first appointment, I had much to unlearn. Big time pruning. I learned a lot, often the hard way, about listening for understanding, trying to pick up on nonverbal cues and never making assumptions.

At Dranesville Church, I set aside the cross-cultural perspective for an overwhelmingly White congregation. By virtue of the makeup of the congregation and personal circumstances, I found that I had to learn a lot about caregiving and ministry to and with seniors. Ministry with seniors is an important component of almost every congregation; but this ministry became something we could offer the community. Learning about and helping others to understand Medicare, Medicaid, mental health resources, various types and levels of residential care for seniors, the role of hospice, and (a really important one)

ministry to persons with some form of dementia - all of these were new frontiers for me and for many of you as well.

I also grew a lot spiritually in the past 4-5 years through participation in the Academy for Spiritual Formation - both a five-day and a two-year version. Some of what I learned has been shared with some of you. Fortunately, one member of the congregation has attended a Five-Day Academy with one more hoping to attend when things open up.

You may notice that I described many aspects of ministry or pastoral care which I learned about and added to existing tasks. One thing I didn't mention very often was a list of areas I gave up when I took on the new ones. There's a reason for that - I didn't do a very good job over the years of deciding how many things should be on my plate at one time. I didn't prune away those areas of ministry which someone else should be doing or that had outlived their usefulness. As Ecclesiastes tells us, there is a season for everything. It's important to recognize when these seasons come to an end.

My hope is that, rather than fixate on anything specific I said about my ministry experience, you may have been able to make connections with your faith journey. What were the challenges you faced? How did some of those challenges, as hard as they may have been, help you to learn and grow?

As a congregation, what have been the challenges where some pruning was necessary? One example might be the decision to terminate the lease with Ambleside School in order to reclaim spaces for ministry. The pandemic has temporarily impacted our efforts; but they might resume before too long.

Think of some of the pruning we have had to do in order to conduct worship and Sunday school on line. Even though pruning was involved, we have seen some growth through the increase in the ways members can contribute to worship. Our reach on Sundays extends well beyond the walls of the church building.

Jesus told his followers that they needed to remain in him. Without him they can do nothing on their own. When we remain in Christ, we may go through some tough times when we are being pruned. In the end, the pruning will allow us to better serve Christ and our world. Amen.