

John 15:1 – 8

[Jesus said:] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.

I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, from God, our Father, the Lord Jesus Christ, who welcomes each of us as a beloved child, then nourishes and sustains us through the love and care of Jesus, that we may go out and bear fruit in His name. Amen.

As I thought about this week’s text my growing up experiences in nature came to mind. In my early teen years our family moved from the suburbs of Rochester to ‘the country’ building a house in Ontario New York. My Dad was an avid gardener and he longed for more space to grow both flowers and vegetables. My parents chose an acre lot on which to build a new house – a lot that once had been in the middle of a cherry orchard. And of course my vegetation loving Dad made sure that every tree was left in place that could be. I learned a lot about sustaining trees and plants from my Dad. While I have memories climbing the trees and of the yummy cherry jam and cherry pies my Mom produced with those cherries it is the labors of our family to ensure the trees produced that are the more prominent memories.

Those cherry trees required tending to produce a good crop. My Dad pruned them every year trimming off dead or broken branches, maintaining the stronger healthier ones and cutting off the weaker ones. The trees often looked

pretty sad and bare afterwards, yet it was pruning that encouraged new growth and a better cherry crop. He watched to be sure the trees had sufficient nourishment and water and gave my brothers and me instructions for watering if there hadn't been enough rain. We had to watch to be sure that tent caterpillars didn't set up housekeeping on one of the branches for they would sap the nourishment and eventually kill that branch. And when the fruit was ready for harvest all of us picked cherries for DAYS! The work didn't stop there, cherries were washed, pitted and frozen for future use and then there was the clean-up. Those cherries that fell from the tree and rotted on the ground had to be raked up and put into the compost pile much like the branches that are thrown away and burned in our gospel.

Our cherry trees produced fruit because my Dad, the gardener watched over and tended them. In order for those lovely cherry blossoms to come forth on the ends of the branches and turn to cherries, they had to be attached to healthy branches well connected to the tree trunk that drank up the soil's nutrients through its roots.

They also needed the nourishing moisture from rain or our hose. A branch that cracked from us climbing in the tree or a strong wind didn't get sufficient sustenance and soon died. It was an interconnected relationship.

Listen again to the beginning verses of our gospel lesson, this time as written in The Living Bible translation [John 15:1-4]:

"I am the true Vine, and my Father is the Gardener. He lops off every branch that doesn't produce. And he prunes those branches that bear fruit for even larger crops. He has already tended you by pruning you back for greater strength and usefulness by means of the commands I gave you. Take care to live in me, and let me live in you. For a branch can't produce fruit when severed from the vine. Nor can you be fruitful apart from me.

The vine and the branches is a metaphor Jesus uses to help his disciples and us to understand our relationship to Christ and to each other. Each of us is a branch. Just as branches on a tree we are different in size, shape, have different knots and bruises but all connected. Jesus tells us branches unconnected to the tree can't grow. Likewise we must be connected to flourish, both to the Vine - Jesus Christ, and to one another. Branches being connected to the Vine or the trunk is essential to receiving the nourishment of the soil. Jesus is that Vine 'planted' and given to us by God, the master gardener.

The branches, that's us, must be tended which includes pruning. Pruning or as The Living Bible says 'being lopped off,' cleansed or shaped is really about doing away with those things in our lives that aren't healthy. It also has to do with change – ways we are shaped into faithful believers. Living through this pandemic, job loss, illness, death, our children or friends moving away, divorce, even failing a test in school are some examples that come to mind when I think of being pruned, reshaped or cleansed. I have journeyed through several of those experiences and it was hard, unpleasant, sorrowful and often hurt. I would have preferred to avoid them. Yet looking back those were the times my faith grew stronger, times I reached out more to other faithful followers of Jesus and times I began to produce new fruits through my involvement in church.

Pruning can also be applied to our churches – our buildings and programs. Rev. Jonathan Diebler, Dean of the Genesee Finger Lakes conference talks about pruning our churches in this week's Midweek Musings. He encourages 'every person and every congregation to do some serious pruning,' to examine why we do what we do. That might include things like – are the programs we offer still relevant, does a tradition that has been in place since great grandma was a member still serve the congregation?

Pruning is essential. Life's pruning, both individually and congregationally, are opportunities for growth and learning. Although the branch may be pruned it is still attached to the trunk. Being tested, going through trials, or taking time for

some serious assessment of our church buildings and programs, can be challenging but if we continue to ‘abide’ in Christ who has said ‘He is with us always, He will nourish and sustain us.

Nourishment is another essential part of a good harvest. It comes from being connected or abiding in Jesus. God the Father is both creator and Master Gardener. Through His Son, Jesus Christ – the Vine, we are welcomed into the garden of faith through the waters of our baptisms. Baptism connects us as a branch to the Vine. But just being connected doesn’t guarantee fruit at the end of our branches. In order to grow and thrive, branches need water and nutrients from the soil, drawn up through the trunk of the vine. We must be nourished at Christ’s holy table and through the Word. Branches need fresh clean air, sunshine, space and time to grow, and careful tending that those branches might sprout new branches and spread out. Seeking out new spiritual opportunities, joining together with other believers to explore how our church meets the needs of the hungry, poor, and disenfranchised, participating in racial or climate justice discussions are all ways to nourish our faith.

Verse 8 of our gospel says, “*My true disciples produce bountiful harvests.*” Production is the other part of how Jesus grows believers. A good harvest is the result of careful pruning, nourishing and tending of the branches. But if you look at trees growth, new branches sprout from existing branches. Jesus looks for us as the branches of the Vine to also sprout – to help grow new believers and to serve Him in God’s creation – the garden of the earth. How is it that we as the branches of Christ produce?

There are many ways we as Lutherans ‘produce’ and live out our faith, both locally and in the world. All this talk about the Vine and branches and God as the Gardener, the recent Earth Day activities, and my awareness that our synod is recruiting volunteers to help form a Climate Task Force, led me to take a look at the ELCA Social Statement, ***Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice.***

Our denominations “social statement provides a Christian understanding of the human role to serve in creation, and a hope rooted in God’s faithfulness to the creation from which humans emerge and depend upon for sustaining life. It provides a framework for understanding the human role in creation, the problem of sin and the current environmental crisis...*Caring for Creation* expresses a call to pursue justice for creation through active participation, solidarity, sufficiency and sustainability, and states the commitments of the ELCA for pursuing wholeness for creation — commitments expressed through individual and community action, worship, learning, moral deliberation and advocacy.” [ELCA Social Statement Summary, *Caring for Creation: Vision, Hope, and Justice.*] The Statement was adopted in 1993 but it continues to be very relevant today. Many of the ways the earth is damaged by our actions listed in the Statement are even more critical today. Since that time many creatures of God’s creation, from bugs to animals, have become extinct or very endangered.

As we watch God’s creation continue to blossom all around us in the coming weeks take some time to consider ways to produce that also support sustaining and even improving our natural environment. Your congregation’s highway clean-up events are definitely one way you already are involved. What other things might you do individually or as a congregation? Take time to read the ELCA *Caring for Creation Social Statement* – it is easily found on the ELCA website. You might consider offering to be a part of the synod’s Climate Task Force. It is from the branches attached and nourished by the Vine that we produce a fruitful harvest – we are the branches, Christ’s disciples – what will each one of us do this week to grow the harvest?