

Old Testament Lesson: Isaiah 5:1-7

Biblical writers used a variety of metaphors to talk about God because it helps us human beings have some picture in our minds of what God is like. In the first two verses of this passage, the prophet Isaiah calls God “my Beloved,” and describes God as a gardener who planted a vineyard to grow fine grapes. Notice that by verse three of this chapter it is not the prophet who is speaking, but God is speaking directly to the people of Israel and Judah.

Gospel Lesson: John 15:1-8

Jesus must certainly have heard and known the paragraph from Isaiah that we have just read. For similar to Isaiah, in this passage from the Gospel of John, we hear Jesus calling God, “my Father,” and using a word picture of God as the gardener who cares for a vineyard. Jesus calls himself the vine and his followers are the branches.

Sermon Theme: “Jesus the Vine”

Let us pray: Thank you, God, for gardens and growth and beauty and fruitfulness. Help us to grow as branches of the Jesus vine. Amen.

One of the volunteer tasks that I have enjoyed at North Prospect Union is helping to care for the lawn and for the amazing bushes, trees and flowers that fill the grounds with beauty at every season of the year. You are blessed to have Penny Light here, a horticulturalist who has placed in the soil such a wonderful variety of plants. And you are blessed to have other volunteers who have continued to help care for these grounds through the years. So if you have ever mowed the lawn, trimmed the hedge, planted a flower, pruned a bush, or helped to care for the church yard and garden in any way, please stand up! Thank you!

It has only been since June that I have had the privilege of helping with some mowing, trimming and pruning. It is a privilege to work in a garden, because when you work with plants you know you are seeing a miracle every day. You see seeds become tiny shoots; you see small plants become large and strong. You see the growth of gorgeous flowers and you marvel at their extraordinary but fragile beauty. You see how plants need to be pruned and shaped to produce more flowers or fruit.

In June, the roses on the Quincy Street part of the yard were stunning, with a profusion of large pink blossoms. It was my task to prune off the flowers that were past their prime, and cut them back when they stuck through the fence so they did not intrude on the sidewalk. That gave me the opportunity to take some roses home to my lady friend, and that pleased her while it cleared the sidewalk. **[First rose slide]**

In a couple of weeks, most of those roses were gone, and I thought their season was ended. But another crop of roses blossomed in late July, and again their beauty and fragrance blessed our neighborhood. A few are still blooming. How could this be? **[Second rose slide]**

One part of the answer is that they were pruned, cut back at the right time, after they blossomed, so that they would bloom again. Pruning helps a plant; as Penny says, they like to be pruned. It helps them to do what God designed them to do. [Third rose slide]

When you work in a garden, if you are thoughtful, you know that you are working with God. You know that the work you are doing is holy work, because a garden is a gift from God. We can dig holes and plant seeds, we can fertilize and bring water, we can cut and prune. But it is God who provides the miracle of growth.

Isaiah called God a gardener who dug out space on a very fertile hill to plant a vineyard of choice vines. Isaiah says that God cleared the vineyard of stones, built a wall around it and a watchtower to protect it. God expected it to grow good grapes. [Scene of hillside]

Grapevines require a mild climate, moisture and good soil. These photos were taken near the Finger Lakes in New York State, where there are many vineyards. Here is the vineyard bearing fruit. [Grapes photo- it can be left on the screen]

Jesus called God his Father, and described God as a vine grower who removes the branches of the vine that do not bear fruit. But God prunes the branches that do bear fruit, so that they will bear more fruit. In fact, Jesus told the disciples that they had already been pruned (or cleansed) by the words that he had spoken to them.

In my yard we have two tomato plants, and recently we have enjoyed fresh delicious tomatoes off the vine. In part, that is because we cut off the suckers, those long branches that grew up early but had no flowers on them. They were taking energy away from the plant, and so they needed to be removed. Other branches needed to be trimmed a bit – those which were too close to the ground; those which had turned yellow or dried out. That care helped to focus the energy of the plant in those branches where fruit would develop.

We who are Jesus' disciples also need to be pruned. This is true both of a congregation and of individual disciples. As a congregation we sometimes get stuck in those deadly "seven last words of the church" which are: "We have always done it this way." Sometimes we have grown wild grapes instead of good grapes, like the vineyard described in the Isaiah verses. The prophet feared that God had already given up on that vineyard of Israel and Judah. So we, who are part of God's vineyard, need to pay attention. We have a calling as Jesus' disciples to be in ministry in this community. We celebrate God's presence and seek the fullness of what God calls us to be. So in our life together, what do we need to prune and what do we need to fertilize? What takes energy away from our core mission and what is a blessing to this community of faith and the neighborhood which surrounds it?

As individual disciples we also need to be pruned. Sometimes we need an "attitude adjustment." There may be certain habits of our thinking and our speaking that are not helpful for us and need to be removed. We may have let our temper get out of control. We may have let our pride get

the best of us. We may have forgotten that we are part of the Jesus branch and have lived with the illusion that we are self-sufficient and do not need other people. We may have forgotten to be courteous, compassionate and respectful of others. You know better than anyone else where the pruning needs to take place in your soul and spirit.

Does it hurt a plant when you cut back its branches and trim away the suckers? Since a plant does not have the same kind of nervous system people have, no, it does not hurt. But for us humans when we have to face hard truths and change our ways there can be emotional pain. But that pain may lead to new growth, just as pruning a plant can lead to new growth.

A man who I will call Bruce had a problem. In his 70's and living alone, his wife having died and his children far away, Bruce was worried about taking care of his home. He had always been able to maintain his home well, but now the burden of its care seemed overwhelming. A cheerful volunteer at the local hospital, Bruce was usually outgoing and optimistic. But now Bruce became withdrawn. His church friends noticed and asked the pastor to visit him. In the course of the conversation, it became clear to both of them that Bruce needed to talk about his worries with a skilled counselor. So the pastor made a referral. After a few sessions with this caring counselor Bruce was able to work through or prune away the issues that worried him, and he regained his normal cheerful, hopeful spirit.

Spiritual and emotional pruning helps a person grow to fulfill their purpose, to become stronger and more beautiful, and to lift their branches toward the sun.

The prophet Isaiah said that the vineyard of the Lord is the people of Israel and Judah. God planted this vineyard to grow good fruit, but rather God saw that there was violence rather than justice and righteousness. So when his vineyard failed to produce good grapes, God the gardener decided not to prune it anymore, but to tear down the protecting wall and let the vineyard be overrun with briars and thorns. This is God's harsh judgment expressed against the people of Israel and Judah; this is not the God of compassion that we meet in the New Testament.

William H. Willimon, a well-known Christian pastor, author, teacher and leader, has created a lot of discussion by suggesting that many small congregations ought to close. He says that some small churches become ingrown, only concerned about the welfare of their own members rather than the larger community, and that they do not welcome newcomers. Because of their "insufferable triviality" they drain human and financial resources from the denomination. The question at the heart of this discussion is whether small congregations are bearing fruit.

I believe that many small congregations, like this one, are vital centers for spiritual formation and growth, places where our children begin to learn the basics of our Christian faith, and where adults continue to grow throughout their lives. Here we learn our connection with spiritual seekers who have gone before us, those who have taken the message of the Bible seriously. We learn how our story intersects with the stories of the people of the Bible. I have found this church to be a place of hope and peace. It is here that we learn to know God. It is here that we

may find mutual support for in our ministries in the world. So I am glad for the spirit of this congregation, and pray that it may always bear good fruit.

We are sometimes tempted to think that we do not need each other, but we do. We are organically connected to one another like the branches on a vine. It is sometimes not easy to live with the other branches. But all of us draw life from the vine, that is, from Jesus. When we draw our life from him, we get connected to the other branches, like it or not. And the strengths of the other branches will be a blessing to us.

Jesus told his followers: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” And he said, “Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit.” The connection we have with Jesus gives us strength to do good work in the community.

Your assignment today: As you leave the church building, look around at all the beautiful plants in the yard. Look at the flowers for their many colors. Can you find white, yellow, pink, blue and purple flowers? Notice that the Rose of Sharon out front near Osgood Street has blossoms in two colors. Look for one or two trees, bushes or flowers that you have not noticed before.

Consider that you are a part of God’s garden. You are a branch of the Jesus Vine. It is God’s purpose for you that you bear good fruit. Because God loves and cares for you, God continues to prune you. Sometimes that will hurt. But it will make you stronger and more beautiful and more productive as you draw your life energy from Jesus the Vine.

This sermon, by Pastor Lawrence R. Bergstresser, was preached at North Prospect Union UCC, Medford, MA, on August 18, 2013.