

PRUNING 101

John 15: -18; May 2, 2021; Union Cong. United Church of Christ

Rev. Robin Raudabaugh

I am the vine, you are the branches – cut off from me, you can do nothing. Jesus knew some things about the importance of staying connected. He knew that cut off from the source of our strength, we will wither and die. He knew that when we stay connected – in healthy ways – to the source of sustenance – we will grow and flourish with the potential to produce abundant yields.

Over the past year we've learned a lot about what it means to be cut off from our sources of strength – disconnected from those we love. We've learned things about ourselves and what it means for each of us to be disconnected from that which supports us, gives us strength and nourishes our souls.

Due to circumstances of a deadly virus, we were pruned from our family trees, from our friends, from our workplaces, from our communities and other places of connection – and because of that, we understand perhaps in more real ways than we might have previously, how being cut off has led to our withering, and perhaps even dying from being severed from our source of support.

Sometimes we hear Jesus' words about vines and branches and being cut off as a threat. We hear, "Bear fruit – now – or we're cutting you off – and into the fire you go." We hear words of judgment telling us that if we don't bear fruit, it means we have become disconnected from the vine.

But what if, instead of threat - Jesus' words are 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." If – then. If you remain connected, it is a given that you will produce fruit.

John's community was in a precarious situation – choosing to believe and follow Jesus made these new believers suspect in the eyes of the religious authorities. Their religious activity as Jesus believers could have gotten them excommunicated from the church. And that worried them because community was everything and if they were in danger of losing that, it frightened them.

To be cast out – homeless – landless – family less – was the ultimate in shame and despair. And now, John's community was struggling to redefine community with Jesus as the core essential characteristic.

The metaphor of vines and branches and vine grower was intended to be and might have been comforting to a community feeling cut off from their former community by helping them realize how closely connected they could remain to the Jesus vine. As Jewish people, they surely knew the stories of how the people of Israel over and over again disappointed God by their failures to stay connected and be fruitful (connected, communal, compassionate and justice focused.)

Jesus reminds this new generation of believers – and doubters - that he is not God – but he is integrally connected to God. God is the Great Grower and Jesus is the vine. God is the one nurturing the strong roots that go on and on. Jesus is the one producing the branches – us – the parts that can bear fruit.

The power of a metaphor is not that it defines a thing, but that it points to something else. We can certainly push a metaphor too far with questionable or even disastrous results, and yet used judiciously, the metaphor can open new possibilities for understanding.

Jesus talked about the importance of staying connected by using the image of pruning to achieve a productive vine. He also talked about the branches being discarded – tossed away to be burned in the fire. And yet, we know from commercial vineyards, that many of the branches pruned away from healthy vines, are not thrown into the fire, but are carefully selected and prepared to be brand new rootstock for another vineyard somewhere else. This certainly can be a wonderful metaphor for new church growth and expansion.

We can talk about the pruning of ourselves and our churches in both positive and negative ways. Cutting away negativity, anxiety, unhelpful people in our lives. Or we might have some concern that cutting away too much can push us to create ideas about insiders and outsiders and why some are valuable and others are not.

Perhaps a more hopeful understanding of the science and art of vineyard pruning reminds us that pruning is not a one time activity, but is accomplished throughout the growing season, and is also done every year to maintain the very best vineyard.

Pruning to maintain relationships and connections in our churches is also not a one time activity – but one that needs to be done regularly to maintain healthy vines and branches – healthy community.

God as Master Gardener gives us many metaphors for right relationships and maintaining healthy connections within our churches, our communities, and with God. Jesus used many of these metaphors to describe himself: Good shepherd, Door, Light, Vine, Rock, Stone.

Many of the metaphors Jesus used came from rural life like raising animals or caring for growing crops because these images would have been familiar to his listeners. For many of us, these images continue to be helpful and provide comfort in our times of feeling cut off from or distanced from that which gives us strength.

Tending livestock, cultivating gardens and fields, and adopting pets might all be helpful ideas for many of us as we seek to embody the kind of relationships and connections Jesus wanted for us.

Perhaps in similar fashion to the metaphors we imagined last week instead of Good Shepherd, I wondered if Jesus was speaking to us today, what kind of metaphors he might use to help us better understand the God/Jesus/People relationship.

God is the car manufacturer, Jesus the mechanic, and we are the drivers of the cars.

Our God is the architect, Jesus the builder and we the buildings or the homeowners.

As a farmer and gardener, I like the image of the vineyard. I like imagining the strong, hundreds of years old root systems hidden underground supporting the carefully trellised vines above. I like imagining all the diversity of vinegrowers providing everything possible to nurture both healthy vines and an abundant yearly harvest. And I like imagining the products of that harvest - wonderful wine or juice, jelly pressed and made with love from all those fruits.

I am reminded of the banner our liturgical arts team created a few years ago of a tree with roots and branches, the leaves on those branches being the many colored handprints of each one big and small, young and older, who is a part of this church. That banner epitomizes to me this scripture text from the gospel of John. It is a visual reminder of how closely we are connected to one another, to Jesus, to God – leaves connected to branches, branches to trunk, trunk to roots – deeply rooted in faith. We are, as Jesus reminded disciples through the ages, Created for Connection.