

## **2021 05 09 – The Vine of Love**

**John 15:1-17** (The Inclusive Bible)

Over the past few years, I've discovered that one of my favourite gardening tools is the lopper. Like its smaller cousin, the hand pruner, the lopper is used for cutting branches off of trees, bushes or vines. I love the satisfaction of the two-handed force and often the loud grunt that is required to lop off a larger branch. I also enjoy the process of deciding which branches need to be cut off and which need to stay and then the joy of gazing at the beautiful shape of the bush or tree when I'm done.

Of course removing branches is not just about the shape or aesthetics of the plant. There are lots of reasons to prune. The most obvious parts to cut away are those that have been damaged by harsh weather, are diseased or have already died. But it is important to remove even some of the healthy branches. This is especially true for plants that produce fruit. When you are growing fruit, quality is just as important as quantity. If there are too many branches, then the vine or the bush or the tree will not be able to properly feed all the fruit that is growing. The produce will be small or may not even ripen properly. Fruit needs sunlight to fully mature and so thick foliage will just get in the way.

In today's scripture Jesus says to his disciples:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower who cuts off every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, but prunes the fruitful ones to increase the yield. You've been pruned already, thanks to the word that I have spoken to you.

Yikes, Jesus is talking about pruning people! It's one thing to lop a branch off a bush or tree, but what does it mean to prune a part of me? How would I know what parts to lop off? What parts of me are damaged or diseased? What parts of me are blocking the sun needed for the fruit that I am growing? What parts of me do I need to let go of? Could it be the anger or resentment that I've been holding onto? Could it be the addictive behavior that is using up my resources? Could it be some of the busyness that is filling up my time? Could it be my constant need for more? Could it be my pride or lust or fear or envy? Wow, I guess there may be a few branches or at least a few twigs that could be pruned.

But cutting off some part of me sounds like it could be pretty painful! I don't think it's something that I could do all by myself. Luckily, Jesus also told his disciples,

Live on in me, as I do in you...  
I am the vine, you are the branches.  
Those who live in me and I in them  
will bear abundant fruit.

Jesus is assuring his disciples that, even after his death, he will be with them.

When he speaks these words, Jesus knows there is a good chance he will be killed in the next few days. He knows his disciples are worried. So he assures them that the Risen Christ, the Holy Spirit, the Essence of Love will never leave them. Even after his death, they will abide in the Vine of Love just as the Vine of Love abides in them.

The good news is that Jesus' promise is true for us, too. We also live in God, in the Holy Mystery just as the Holy Mystery abides in us. When we consider the pain of lopping off parts of ourselves, we need to remember that we don't have to

do this by ourselves. Walter Wink, a well-known s theologian, when writing about his own personal pruning process once said,

I realized later that I was free to abort the process at any point. Something in me stayed with the process simply because God was in it. This, too, was a way to abide. "Abide in me and I in you," ... Abide in me, for there are branches that, when pruned, can be used to build the inferno in which you can be cooked, and cleansed, and slowly shaped into a human being. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m1058/is\\_n13\\_v111/ai\\_15177815/](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1058/is_n13_v111/ai_15177815/)

Pruning is not a pleasant experience. Wink compares it to being cooked and cleansed in a fire. Some of the parts of ourselves that need to be pruned may be things that we enjoy, things that we don't want to let go of. They may be things that seem to be useful and yet they still need to be pruned in order to make space for the fruit to ripen. Sometimes there are hard choices that have to be made.

I remember how hard it was to let go of being "one of twins" as Colette and I made the choice to live separate lives and headed off to different universities. I remember how hard it was to let go of my identity as an IBM'er so that I could begin a new vocation in ministry. I remember how hard it was to let go of the anger and to forgive my childhood abuser. I know how hard it is to say "No" to exciting new opportunities in order to leave space in my life for connection to the Vine of Love in me. Letting go, making hard choices can be painful.

But not making them can be even more painful. Jesus also said,

Those who don't live in me  
are like withered, rejected branches,  
to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned.

If we don't recognize the sacred within ourselves and the Vine of Love that surrounds us then we are missing out. If we don't listen to that still small voice within us and allow ourselves to change and grow then we are not truly living. If we don't accept the pain of letting go, of being pruned, then we will never produce the fruit that we are capable of producing.

You might be saying to yourself, "Why do I care, what is this fruit that you are talking about, anyway?" Well, Jesus answered that question too, when he said,

And you will live on in my love  
if you keep my commandments,  
just as I live on in Abba God's love  
and have kept God's commandments.  
I tell you all this  
that my joy may be yours  
and your joy may be complete.  
This is my commandment:  
love one another as I have loved you."

The fruit of the vine is love, our love for each other and for God's creation. Our fruit is the relationships that we have with our family, our friends, our neighbours, and the world. Our fruit is made known in the acts of love that we perform on a daily basis. Our fruit is the joy that comes from living a life shaped by love.

When we allow ourselves to be pruned, when we accept the pain of growth and change, when we choose to abide in the Vine of Love as the Vine of Love abides in us, then what we have is the joy that comes from love, love of God, love of ourselves and love for one another. May it be so. Amen.