

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2015

1 Cor. 12:1-11; Psalm 36:5-10; 2 Corinthians 5:1-17; John 15:1-8

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My husband, Albert, was quite the rosarian before we married and started our family, with over 20 varieties of roses in the side yard with names as sweet and colorful as the blooms. I soon learned how much work they took, and even this all-natural, organic buying earth Mama quickly subscribed to the “Spray and Pray” philosophy of rose growing. Around Valentine’s Day that first Tifton winter, I learned how to prune the rose bushes, and prune them back hard. With shears in one hand, and a thick leather glove on the other, I went after what the internet sensation, Redneck Rosarian, calls the 3Ds - the Dead, Diseased and Damaged—always cutting at an angle just above a leaf bud.

As I looked at my work—piles of thorny canes next to stubby stalks—I worried that I had ruined my new husband’s beautiful rose garden. It didn’t seem possible that a full rose bush with vibrant and fragrant roses would soon emerge from such severe cuttings, but it sure did.

From pruning, new beauty

From change, growth.

From endings, a beginning.

If you’ve been around St. Anne’s for the last few weeks and months, these words may ring familiar. As the new Ministry Center nears completion, and as we plan our goodbyes for the “old” education building, change and growth, endings and beginnings, are part of the daily parlance around here. How appropriate, then, to be given this Gospel passage about pruning and tending, about bearing fruit. We hear in the Gospel that even the branch that bears fruit, the vine-grower prunes to make it bear more fruit.

And one of this church’s big branches, a building that has helped this congregation bear much fruit over the past 30-some years, is about to get pruned back —pruned back hard, all the way to the ground — to allow the space and energy needed for new growth. Even though we know that the fruits of the building will continue to live on in our hearts and our lives, far after the branch is removed, it can be hard to watch. Hard to trust.

Maybe it's a little easier for us, because a new branch is already growing, but we don't know yet exactly how it will grow or what fruit it will help us bear over time.

The hard reality is that, in order for the new branch to flourish, it too will need regular pruning. (Hopefully only *very light pruning* for a good long time!) As Jesus taught, pruning is as much a spiritual law as a natural process, and it's one that runs counter to the values of our American, capitalistic culture that demands unending growth, a culture that values *more, bigger, better, faster, busier*. It may be tempting for us to believe that as soon as the "old" education building is gone, we are called to more and more and more rapid growth. More people, more programs, more outreach ministries, more community groups using our facilities.

But, of course, growth for growth's sake, or *untended* growth, can lead to overladen branches that break under the weight of so much fruit—like my neighbor's pear tree—or to numerous immature fruits that don't have the space and support they need to fully develop and ripen.

So, while it is indeed time for growth, *healthy* growth is often found in quality more so than quantity—in the depth of our faith, relationships, and caring. This is a time flourish, not just grow. A new chance to *thrive*.

What does it mean for the church and for us to thrive? It can mean a lot of things, but in the context of today's readings, I think it means at least these three:

First, it means abiding in Christ. This Gospel passage uses the word "abide" eight times in just four verses! While the passage has plenty to say about pruning and fruit, it is primarily about our *relationship* with Christ—an active relationship of deep love and mutual dependence. Just as a vine or trunk carries water and nutrients to branches, and the leaves of the branches in turn create food for the vine to survive, so we can live in a life-giving flow of love and energy with God. To borrow a phrase from an Episcopalian church leader in Darien, Georgia, we can live in the "love circulation." How? Through regular participation in worship and the Sacraments, through a rich prayer life, through fellowship with other believers, and through acts of caring service - to name just a few ways.

Second, to thrive means to live into one's unique spiritual gifts. As we hear in 1 Corinthians today, all believers are given the "manifestation of the Spirit for the common

good,” and then also specific gifts activated by the Spirit such as wisdom, knowledge, healing, faith, prophecy and even tongues. Now, these are not the sum total of all the Spirit’s gifts; there are many varieties, as Paul explains. We know, for instance, that the spiritual gifts of frying chicken and making sweet tea are some of the varieties in the Deep South. Or some are given the gift of listening, or hospitality, or perhaps caregiving. Church congregations have unique collective gifts as well. Discerning these gifts through prayer, experience, and conversation with spiritual mentors helps us stay focused on what we can do *best* when we feel tempted to do *everything*. Some people make a practice of noting experiences in which they feel most alive and fulfilled as a way of discerning gifts.

Third, thriving means pruning. Careful pruning leads to new and healthier growth, and this kind of pruning is a gift, as hard as it can be to experience at times. I believe that God’s pruning is internal—pruning of our souls, our desires and habits, our ego, of the Dead Diseased and Damaged in our hearts. However, we may also be pruned externally, by life, by illness, by others, and by our own actions, good or bad. This latter kind of pruning is not always gift, but if we abide in God—if we stay in the love circulation—God can and will bring new and glorifying growth from the broken places and losses of our lives. Perhaps when life prunes us back hard in all the wrong places, God steps in and tenderly, gracefully makes a new cut just above a leaf bud to speed the growth process.

When we truly thrive as a church, and as individuals, we yield mature fruit bursting with God’s love. And that fruit is for others, because branches don’t live off their own fruit. We become Jesus’ disciples as we share that fruit with friends and strangers alike, helping them to also thrive. Not just *survive*, but truly thrive.

I often hear charitable programs boast that they help people *achieve independence*, or become *productive members of society*, or *maintain self-sufficiency*. Sometimes I hear myself say the same, as steeped in Western culture as I am. These are good and necessary things, yes, and sometimes the immediate call is to help someone survive. Yet, very often the call to discipleship runs deeper.

God calls us to help the disconnected and lonely to draw nearer to God’s presence, to abide in God’s love. This could mean inviting them to church, to pray with or for them, or to provide spiritual resources.

God calls us to help those who feel worthless or purposeless to discover, develop, and share their unique gifts. Perhaps this means some deep conversation or regular reflection, and certainly affirming what gifts you already observe in them.

God calls us to help those suffering amid loss and change to trust that God can always, always, always bring new growth, if only we abide in Christ. We might share stories of how God has done this for us.

A pretty new branch like our ministry center is going to attract new people and new opportunities for ministry to this congregation. There are some already knocking at the freshly-painted doors, asking for our involvement. New ideas and hopes are emerging from among us as well. Each “knock,” each opportunity, gives the church a chance to ask important questions:

- Would this help people truly thrive?
- What spiritual gifts are present that could flourish?
- Is there enough space and energy on this “branch” for this? Would this help or hinder growth?
- How might this help us, and others, deepen our relationship with God and others? In other words, does this keep love circulating?

We can ask the same questions of ourselves, as individuals, when people and projects and crises near and far present themselves, and we are not sure what we are called to do. The answers are rarely crystal clear, but the questions can help guide us into healthy growth and sustained discipleship, acting not out of our own power but rather allowing God’s power to move through us.

You may be wondering how Albert’s roses are growing now. The honest answer is ... not well. I guess they were indeed pruned hard, but perhaps not by my own hand. We now instead cultivate two young boys, and rows of green beans are now climbing vines where many of the roses once basked in the sunniest spot in our yard.

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From change, growth.
From endings, a beginning.

The process of growth and change can be hard. But if we stay grounded in Christ, live into our collective and individual gifts, and trust the vine-dresser's pruning, we can and will thrive with healthy growth, bearing the sweetest fruit in the universe, as fragrant as a Madame Isaac Pierre rose — and there will be plenty to share.

Amen.