

Pruning the Deadwood

5th Sunday of Easter, 2018

In the name of the one names us, claims us and makes us his own. Amen.

About ten years ago or so, my husband was replacing a fence on one side of our yard. And because he's kind of a master builder and a man of vision, a simple fence wasn't good enough. It had to have a glowing piece of art glass embedded in the gate, be welcoming to our neighbors and it supported a full-length arbor on which he would plant grapevines. Thus began the annual ritual.

The second sign of spring at our house, after the arrival of the crocuses and the daffodils, is Steve's search on Youtube for instructions on how to prune the grapevines. Pruning is apparently one of those tasks that, because you only do it once a year, reminders are necessary.

As is pruning. We let it go for the first few years, thinking it would help the young vines get a firm footing and we were mistaken. Left untrimmed, the vines were as rampant as undisciplined teenagers, all enthusiasm and not much to show for it, fruitwise. We should have read this gospel passage sooner.

Greg Stier is the founder of Dare2Share Ministries, an organization that emphasizes youth ministry. In his blog, Mr Stier described his experience pruning grapevines in Italy and the insights he drew from that. He writes, "After breakfast on our second day there we were asked by the owner if we wanted to help prune the vineyard as a family. Without hesitation I said *"Of course we do! How often do city people like us get to do something like that?"* She warned us, *"Be careful! The vines will speak to you as you prune them!"* I just nodded and awkwardly smiled, not completely knowing how to respond to her statement.

We were all given gloves, clippers and a crash course in pruning. They told us how to cut away every vine that didn't have grape buds on it (it was too early in season to see actual grapes.) They told us to trim relentlessly and throw away the branches that have no fruit on them. They reminded us that the buds need as much of the sap and sunlight as possible and that, when we cut away huge branches that have no buds on them, we were actually helping, not hurting the vine.

So we started, relentlessly cutting away branches in the increasingly hot Italian sunlight. And, within minutes the vines were *"talking"* to me."

Maybe it was that "increasingly hot Italian sunlight" or maybe it was insight brought on by the almost biblical experience that pruning grapes can be, but Mr Stier reflected on today's gospel reading. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." He listened to the vines and learned from them.

He learned that what feels like ruthlessness can lead to fruitfulness. That even experience doesn't make you perfect and that even if we think we own the vineyard, we are only the custodians.

We abide in Christ as he abides in us. We are tangled together in one big vine-y, branch-y, wibbly-wobbly jumbled mess.

The Reverend Ritva Williams is the pastor at St Stephen's Lutheran Church in Cedar Rapids. She writes, "We are not and cannot be the vine that gives life to all. Neither are we the vine grower, the one who cultivates, stakes, supports and yes, prunes the branches, even though all too often we act like we have the knowledge and right to hack at the branches around us. We are not the vine, we are not the vine grower, we are branches to whom God has given a choice. We can choose to abide in Christ, or, we can choose not to abide in Christ. Jesus tells us what is at stake in making that choice: just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me... To abide is all about remaining, staying, tarrying somewhere, taking up residence, making one's self at home." She concludes, "Jesus teaches us that there are many abiding places — many places to be at home in God's house."

I would add that to abide has another meaning, to be able to stand something, to tolerate it. And as Pastor Williams believes, we are branches to whom God has given a choice. We can choose what we will abide and what we will not. For many of us, we see ourselves as brothers and sisters "tangled together in one big vine-y, branch-y. jumbled mess" and may choose not to abide in injustice, division and hatred. Our branches may choose to abide in a world where weapons are beaten into pruning hooks, tools that will remove the unfruitful branches that strangle us all.

Pruning and maintaining a vineyard is work. Often hard work. Choosing not to abide evil is work. Erik Wikstrom, a Universalist pastor reminds us that beating weapons of war into instruments of peace will be hard. "Call up in your mind the image of a blacksmith – the forge hot and smoky, the hammer heavy, and the metal hardly malleable," he says. Listen to the clanging of the hammer and anvil, the sound of the bellows as they blow air into the fire, the crackle as the coals are heated, and the *shhhhhhhh* as the hot metal is put into the cold water to harden it. Feel the heat and the ache in your arms and back; smell the smoke and the sweat. They shall *beat* their swords into plowshares. It's not going to be easy."

But we ignore this work at our peril. The cost of NOT working for peace is unbearably high. Back in 1953, only three months after he took office, President Eisenhower wrote, "Every gun that is made, every warship launched, every rocket fired signifies, in the final sense, a theft from those who hunger and are not fed, those who are cold and are not clothed. This world in arms is not spending money alone. It is spending the sweat of its laborers, the genius of its scientists, the hopes of its children. The cost of one modern heavy bomber is this: a modern brick school in more than 30 cities. It is two electric power plants, each serving a town of 60,000 population. It is two fine, fully equipped hospitals. It is some fifty miles of concrete pavement. We pay for a single fighter with a half-million bushels of wheat. We pay for a single destroyer with new

homes that could have housed more than 8,000 people. . . . This is not a way of life at all, in any true sense. Under the cloud of threatening war, it is humanity hanging from a cross of iron.”

We pay with the lives of our futures, and this cost not I, nor any one of us, can abide.

So what do we do? We keep up hope. We pray for strength. We act. We write letters and we make a scene if we have to. We march.

This afternoon, for the fifteenth time, you can join the Philadelphia Interfaith Walk for Peace and Reconciliation, walk with your brothers and sisters, draw strength from each other and know the way that God, no matter what we name him, abides in all of us. That, as Pastor Williams said, “there are many abiding places — many places to be at home in God’s house.” We can talk and dream together, pilgrims traveling together on a perilous journey.

“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them...those who love God must love their brothers and sisters.”

The crocuses, the daffodils and the annual search on Youtube for pruning instructions all bring us the hope of spring and the rebirth of Easter; the annual Peace Walk reminds us, even if we can’t participate in the walk itself, to recommit to our need to work for peace. To turn ourselves away from being weapons of war, hatred and divisiveness into pruning hooks, agents of God’s peace.

A Prayer for Peacemakers

Spirit of God, give me the openness, deep within me to recognize each day all people as made in your image and likeness.

Help me to learn from others the ways of being fully alive, at peace with myself and with those around me.

Give me the courage to transform those parts of myself and our world that separate and create enmity.

Help me to take steps to stop the cycle of violence in our homes, in our workplaces, in our neighborhoods, in our country, in our world.

May I be open to my deepest yearning for a world alive with your justice and truth, to dream of a society where all are treated with respect, and, with the power of your Spirit, to take steps to bring it about.

Amen.