

Pruning the Vines

The Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2020

The Church of the Ascension, Chicago

The Very Rev. Patrick Raymond

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." John 15:1-8

If you are following the order of worship provided with this mass, I hope you may have taken a moment to savor the image on the cover page. It's an early 16th century painting that depicts laborers tending and pruning in a highly idealized vineyard.

This particular painting is from an illustrated devotional book popular at the time and known as a 'Book of Hours.' A calendar sub-section was known as The Labours of the Months. The vine-pruning image was painted for the month of February.

This detail about the painting may have caught my attention because, as some of you know, this same Gospel text from John, with its language and imagery of vine, branches and pruning, was also appointed for the mass that we shared this past Wednesday evening. The image that I chose for the cover of that mass is by a living artist, and she titled that painting, *Pruning the Vineyard in February*.



My curiosity and a little research confirmed that, all over the northern hemisphere, vineyards are commonly pruned in February. It's a fallow, dormant time. The grapes have long been harvested; the vineyard leaves turned and fallen. The new-life surge of spring is still weeks or months away.

Here in Chicago, we are now clearly well into spring and even on the cusp of summer. The first big thunderstorms have rolled in. The trees that have been holding out are now budding. Motorcyclists are out taking their first rides and vroom-vrooming around.

Even with all of this, February may be lingering for many of us now. Emotionally, socially, we feel stuck in some down, fallow, inert time. Call it a stalled spiritual February. But I wonder if, despite the confinement and discomforts, this may be an opportune time for pruning.

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Those who first heard these words of Jesus, on the night before he died for them, and us, were likely more familiar than you or I about tending vineyards. It may have been more natural for them to connect the imagery of vine and vineyard and pruning to their own experiences of faith in him. They would have known about pruning in winter. I had to look it up.

I also looked up some other aspects of vineyard care that may get us a little closer to what Jesus hopes for us here. Brent Young, Director of Vineyard Operations for a California winery, observes that "*grapevine pruning is part science, part art ... doing it right determines the size of the harvest and the quality of the wine.*"¹ Some of us may know this to be true in our lives of faith. There's the 'science,' as it were -- the tried and true forms and prayers and sacraments and acts of love and justice by the books, and then there's the artistry of internalizing and manifesting a genuine, living faith in my one idiosyncratic life and time.

Horticulturalist Bernadine Strik is author of a piece titled, DON'T BE TIMID WHEN PRUNING GRAPES. She writes, "*Home grape growers don't prune their vines enough Poor pruning year after year leads to low yield and poor fruit quality.*"² Strik's counsel brings to mind Thoreau's famous quote: "*There are a thousand hacking at the branches of evil to one who is striking at the root.*"

Finally, for those of us who imagine we are too old to learn or change, a hopeful message from an Australian Agricultural journal. The piece is titled, How to Revive Tangled Old Grapevines. Author Peter Cundall, writes, "*Even the most straggly, neglected and nonproductive grapevines can be pruned to force them into carrying great bunches of grapes ... The aim*" he insists, "*is to get rid of huge amounts of useless, congested canes ...*"

And isn't it true how much useless deadwood you and I can accumulate and carry around. We all know there are many different grapes: zinfandel, sauvignon blanc, rosé. And the deadwood in our lives has as many varieties: for many of us, obviously, our material belongings of questionable present value, but also grudges we harbor, disappointments about how things should have turned out but didn't, and so much more. On so many of those branches, there's been no real fruit for years, if ever, has there? What of our many, many commitments and attachments are genuinely fruitful and worthy of this day, this life, for the glory of God?

You may have noted the punitive tone in this teaching -- the fruitless branches hacked off, given to the fire and burned. That harsh imagery can obscure the fundamental motive here, the invitation and promise of Jesus himself that you and I may abide in him, and he in us. The vision and motive of Jesus here brings to mind a haunting dare in a line from the poet David Whyte: "*Give up all the other worlds except the one to which you belong.*"⁴

You and I may imagine that we are presently stuck in a tortuous ongoing spiritual February. Maybe we're being given a rare and important opportunity to do some pruning.

Image 1: From the Da Costa Book of Hours, Simon Bening, ca. 1515, collection of the Morgan Library, New York.

Image 2: *Pruning the Vineyard in February*, Jill Steenhuis, 2008

¹ From a blog titled *How to prune grape vines* at www.jorganwindery.com

² From an undated feature for the Oregon State University Extension, at www.extension.oregonstate.edu

³ From the *Weekly Times*, April 26, 2017

⁴ From the poem *Sweet Darkness* in the collection *The House of Belonging*, 1997.