

THE UNPLEASANT EXPERIENCE OF BEING PRUNED

John 15:1-8

A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward on the Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.

Focus Passage

*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.*

I have recently shared with the New Testament class an experience I think I shared in a sermon with you many years ago.

Between my second and third years of seminary, I served a fifteen-month internship in my hometown of Memphis, primarily as a Campus Minister at the University of Tennessee Medical School. In addition, on weekends I drove an hour south to Helena, Arkansas, an old river town on the Arkansas side of the Mississippi Delta. I made that trip to more or less follow around on the weekends Dr. Robert Walkup, a venerable, well-known, white-haired Presbyterian minister who was closing out his ministry in this small Delta town.

Early in my time there, Dr. Walkup took me aside and told me a story about the previous intern. I don't know if he was telling me the story as a *warning* of how not to be or as a *veiled* criticism of how he had already observed me being, but the story goes like this.

The first time this previous intern preached, the title of his sermon was "The Helping Hand Strikes Back." In it, the budding preaching said essentially, that God extends a helping hand to us when we are doing the *right* thing, but when are *not*, the helping hand of God strikes back in punishment.

In his voice that was as deep and gravelly as the late Senator Everett Dirksen of Illinois, Dr. Walkup said: "I took that young man into my office and said:

I want you to go home, get down on your knees, and give thanks to God that French and Maide McKnight exercised a rare absence from worship today.

Twenty years ago, they had a daughter who was a nursing student in Memphis. They went to visit her one weekend. When they got home, they called to say they had arrived safely. She didn't answer. They called again. She didn't answer. Finally, they called the apartment manager. Her body was discovered – murdered – in her apartment.

The crime remains unsolved to this day.

Dr. Walkup continued: "Do you really want to tell that faithful couple that the death of their daughter was 'the helping hand of God striking back'?"

He didn't say how the intern responded; but he didn't need to.

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I share this story – as difficult as it is to hear – because it is often the case that whenever we hear Biblical passages that speak of judgment, punishment, discipline, even pruning by God, our hearts constrict, our stomachs tighten, our minds shake in disagreement. These passages can keep us away from church, can weaken or kills our faith.

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....
I am the vine, you are the branches.*

Is our passage today just a slightly less harsh version of “the helping hand strikes back”?

I think not, and I want to walk you through three reasons why I believe it is richer and deeper than the intern’s sermon. So, follow me along.

I.

The first reason I think that Jesus’ words about pruning and the experience we have of being pruned are deeper than mere punishment on the part of God relates to the context in which Jesus speaks these words.

When Jesus speaks of pruning, he is aware from being put to death. He is giving to his disciples what is known as “The Farewell Discourse,” Chapters 14-17 in the Gospel of John, in which through a series of words and gestures Jesus is preparing his disciples to live in the world without him.

Prior to his words about pruning:

- He speaks to them about the way to God, whom he describes as his Father and theirs.¹
- He speaks to them of the Holy Spirit which will come as Comforter and Advocate in his absence.²
- And he speaks to them of what they will *soon* experience in terms of
 - Rejection and hatred from the world³
 - Sorrow turning into joy⁴
 - And peace.⁵

What the disciples experience in this moment of leave-taking is akin to what we experience when we receive a bittersweet blessing from someone we love in the waning hours of their earthly life. Whether it is our grandparent, parent, spouse, sibling, cousin, young child, adult child, friend, mentor, or colleague, the experience of being blessed by someone whose earthly life is drawing to a close, shapes the remainder of our earthly walk until that day when we join them on the road on which they now walk.

These words about pruning are thus spoken at one of the most tender points in the relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

II.

Second, it is no accident that this passage in which Jesus speaks of us, his disciples, being pruned, is a passage with both begins and ends with God.

At the outset, Jesus says:

*God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.
Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit....*

At the conclusion, Jesus says: *Abide in me and I in you.*

By beginning and ending this passage about pruning with God, Jesus is making the bold promise whatever happens to us – particularly in the way of being pruned – happens in the context of our relationship with God. Thus, whatever it is in

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|----------------|------------------|
| • Our lives | • Our dreams |
| • Our behavior | • Our memories |
| • Our past | • Our hatreds |
| • Our present | • Our prejudices |
| • Our thoughts | • Our anger |
| | • Our bitterness |

¹ John 14:1-14.

² John 14:15-3; 16:5-15..

³ John 15:18-16:4.

⁴ John 16:16-24.

⁵ John 16:25-33.

- Our fears
- Our obsessions
- Our relationships
- Our grudges
- Our egos

that

- Holds us back
- Harms us
- Leads us to harm someone else
- Blocks us from being the person God has created and Christ has redeemed us to be

is something that God himself works hard – often with us –

- To cleanse
- To prune
- To carry off
- To cast away
- If necessary to burn.

What this says to me is

- If it is *God* who removes that within our lives which is damaging
- If it is *God* who prunes that which is destructive
- If it is *God* who abides in us and *God* in whom we abide even when pruning or removal is occurring,

It is better to pass through the unpleasant experience of being pruned *in* the arms of God rather than *alone*.

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In famous opening works to *Inferno*, Dante writes:

Midway upon the journey of our life
I found myself within a forest dark,
For the straightforward pathway had been lost.

...

I cannot well repeat how there I entered,
So full was I of slumber at the moment
In which I had abandoned the true way.

But after I had reached a mountain's foot,
At that point where the valley terminated,
Which had with *consternation* pierced my heart,

Upward I looked, and I beheld its shoulders,
Vested already with that planet's rays
Which leadeth others *right* by every road.⁶

Dante describes the experience of “losing his way,” of not knowing how he got on the destructive path on which he finds himself; yet even in his darkest consternation in the “forest savage,” he comes to the foot of a mountain and beholds rays of sunlight by which others travel a right road and by which he can travel as well.

- He is suffering.
- He is being pruned.
- But he is being pruned at the foot of a mountain on the top of which he can see rays of sunlight.
- His pruning occurs under the aegis and in the arms of God.

I first read Dante's *Inferno* in college, and this opening stuck out to me at the time. A few years later, after I had been to seminary and newly-ordained, in a desperate moment in a crumbling early marriage, this passage came back to me. I

⁶ From Dante Alighieri (1265-1321), *Inferno, Canto I*, translated by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow. Available at <https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/inferno-canto-i>.

found on the bookshelf, took it down, re-read it, and began to see and feel, ever so lightly rays of sunlight breaking over the mountain beneath which I was standing.

I was being pruned, severely pruned, branches and relationships and friendships and history and self-confidence and sense of call were being trimmed back or removed altogether. I wasn't sure how I had gotten there, but as unpleasant as the pruning was, I look back and now give thanks that it occurred not *apart from* but *under the aegis of* God. "Abide in me and I in you."

III.

Third, not all pruning involves radical surgery.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit...

My Father is glorified...that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

In reading those who know Greek better than I, I learned this week that the phrase "much fruit" in Greek is "*karpos polys*." *Karpos* is "fruit" and *polys* is "much." The early Christian theologian *Polycarp* may have been named after this verse.⁷ Polycarp. Much fruit. If I had a child on the way, or a puppy, I might name the new arrival *Polycarp*.

What this farewell verse from Jesus is saying is that even when we are bearing fruit, we go through times of pruning – to bear more fruit. This pruning thing never stops. But it is an honor that God cares enough about us and about our world that he continues to prune us that the fruit we bear will enhance life on earth even more. "Polycarp."

IV.

I learned in seminary if you don't really know how to end a sermon you can always quote a hymn, so I'll do that today. We sang it in the early service, but didn't include it in this service, but in a fit of Presbyterian spontaneity, Ben and I have conspired to bring it into this service as well. Turn to hymn #836.

I'll recite the first two stanzas, then signal you to stand if you are able and we will sing the last three together.

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.

Swift to its close ebbs out life's little day;
earth's joys grow dim; its glories pass away;
change and decay in *all* around I see.
O thou who changest not, abide with me.

[Signal congregation to sing]

I need thy presence every passing hour;
what but thy grace can foil the tempter's power?
Who, like thyself, my guide and stay can be?
Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.

I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.

Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.

Amen.

⁷ Raymond E. Brown, S.S., *The Gospel According to John (xiii-xxi)* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc. 1970) 661.