

In What Ways Do We Need Pruning?

Friends, long-time and new, let's begin this time of reflection with prayer. God of all, we welcome your Spirit's presence among us as we wonder about the moments through which your love prunes us – that we might thrive and bear healthy fruit. As disciples of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Beloved people, I invite you to wonder with me this morning: in what ways do we need pruning? How would you answer this question (I invite you to share your thought aloud): why would someone prune a tree? To what end of for what purpose would someone prune a tree? *(To make it more healthy. So the life energy will go where it's most needed and not be pulled off. So your roof stays. To have fewer twigs to pick up from the yard. So it doesn't poke you in the eye when you're mowing. So it bears more fruit. More growth.)* Alright, we're thinking about pruning – good!

This week, I came across multiple lists of reasons to prune a tree. They ranged in number from five to ten. I found five reasons particularly compelling. I think we can draw from them inferences about the benefits of spiritual pruning we experience at times in our lives.

In a few moments, we will review key movements in today's story from Acts – that story in which Cornelius and Peter each experience a vision and then encounter one another. Before we engage with that story, let's recall some of Jesus' poetic words (remembered in the gospel of John) as a foundation for exploring the benefits of pruning. I find Jesus' metaphor of a vine and branches to be both powerful and, in some ways, problematic.

We heard: *"I am the true vine, and my Abba is the vine grower who cuts off every branch in me that doesn't bear fruit, but prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield."*

People of Christian faith have interpreted this metaphor in myriad ways. I sense that Jesus was referring to his way of embodying God's love when he referred to himself as the true vine. In other words, embodied love is the true vine within each living being. Tending to each of us as a true vine, God's love prunes our fruitful branches – and we will return to why.

But Jesus continued: *“Live on in me, as I do in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit of itself apart from the vine, neither can you bear fruit apart from me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who live in me and I in them will bear abundant fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.”* Jesus calls us to abide with him. He longs for us to abide in the strong love that sourced his life and sources each of our lives. How true that if we disconnect from our vine or trunk, our ways of living diminish in terms of loving energy. Conversely, if we abide in God's loving energy that sustains our vine (our trunk), then we will have greater capacity for vibrant, fruitful living.

Finally, in the opening portion of John chapter fifteen, Jesus cautions: *“Those who don't live in me are like withered, rejected branches, to be picked up and thrown on the fire and burned.”* This verse is one of many that has been weaponized over the centuries, interpreted to mean that some whole persons are rejected and destined for eternal hell fire due to not subscribing to our Christian faith. Yet I find in Jesus's words a message that rings truer than that one of us against them (true believers versus lost souls). I hear Jesus calling us to see ourselves as trees, infused by God's life-giving love as the air, sunlight, and minerals that enliven our trunk. We are each acquainted with how a given branch (one of our habits or ways of living) can become withered, dead weight. And we know the feeling of release and renewed vigor that can come from letting go of such a branch (such a habit or a way of living that weighs us down).

Now that we have lingered a moment with Jesus' words, let's return to the question of what benefits come from pruning. Then we will see how Cornelius and Peter benefited from God's loving pruning capacity. Here are the five reasons to prune a tree that resonated with me in terms of our human living:

One: Pruning promotes new growth through redistribution of resources after the removal of a struggling branch. **I wonder: have you had an experience of renewed energy when you've let go of a responsibility that has become so burdensome that takes more life energy from you than the energy or goodness that it adds to your life?**

Two: Fruit production increases after dead parts of a branch are pruned off. **I wonder: have you had an experience in which you noticed and embraced an unexpected and perhaps blunt (*shears*) ending of an effort in your life, only to discover that you could pursue the same good purpose (the same fruit) through a slightly different avenue?**

Three: If a branch has developed a disease, pruning it will prevent the spread of the disease to unaffected parts of the tree. **I wonder: have you had an experience in which one of the branches of your life is pummeled by unhealthy conditions and that this de-energized, less vital part of you starts to affect your capacity to thrive and grow in other parts of your life? Could you prevent those conditions from spreading illness into those healthier parts of your life?**

Four: Pruning can remove excessive growth of a particular branch in a particular direction. **I think this is the part of pruning that has do with saying no or enough. I wonder: have you had an experience of a branch of your life demanding too much of your life force (be it a particular relationship, a project at work, or some other endeavor)?**

How empowering it can be to decide that something or someone does not get to demand so much of your energy! We have enough of God's loving, vital energy in our trunk if we don't let one branch take it all.

Five: A well pruned tree can be stronger and more balanced in a storm than its unpruned neighbors might be. Well, doesn't that kind of say it all? Life is full of storms and challenges. **I wonder: do you give conscious energy to affirming yourself when you are growing to be stronger and more balanced in your living? As such, we are better situated to meet the challenges of life's storms.**

Let's turn now to the wonderful story in today's reading from the book of Acts. I would like to focus in on four moments in the narrative that highlight the benefits of being well pruned.

We heard the how Cornelius experienced a vision that set the tone for the story. We heard: *"One day at about three in the afternoon Cornelius had a vision. He distinctly saw an angel of God enter the house and call out, 'Cornelius!' Cornelius **stared at the angel. completely terrified,** and replied, **'I'm at your service.'**"*

It seems that, for Cornelius, rhythms of reaching out (as we heard: in service and compassion) toward his neighbors had pruned his heart such that he could be open to God's voice in his life – even when terrified.

We later heard how Peter experienced a vision while resting in solitude. We heard: *"...Peter went up to the roof terrace to pray. He was hungry and asked for something to eat. While the meal was being prepared, he fell into a trance. Peter saw heaven standing open, and something like a large sheet being lowered to earth by its four corners. It contained all kinds of animals, birds and reptiles. A voice said, 'Stand up, Peter. Make your sacrifice and eat.' But Peter said, 'I can't, my God.*

*I have never eaten anything profane or unclean.’ The voice spoke a second time and said, ‘**Don’t call anything profane that God has made clean.**’”*

It seems that, for Peter, several years of traveling and ministering alongside Jesus had pruned his heart such that he knew the value of expecting the unexpected and being open to a change of his mind.

We hear this way in which Peter greeted the deputation sent by Cornelius. We heard: “[Peter] went down and said to the deputation, ‘I’m the one you are looking for. What do you want?’ They answered, ‘Cornelius, a centurion –an upright and God-fearing person, respected by the Jewish people – was directed by a holy angel to send for you. **We are to bring you to the household of Cornelius to hear what you have to say.**’ Peter invited them in and gave them hospitality.”

It seems that, for the persons who served Cornelius (some biblical translations say they were enslaved; others say they were servants), years of observing a powerful man who saw and honored his neighbors had pruned their hearts such that they knew to honor what others – from cultures and journeys very different than their own – had to say into their lives.

And finally, after Peter gave his personal testimony about living and collaborating alongside Jesus during his years of ministry and then experiencing Jesus alongside him even after Jesus’ death and resurrection, we heard this: “Peter had not finished speaking these words when **the Holy Spirit descended upon all who were listening to the message. The Jewish believers who had accompanied Peter were surprised that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also, whom they could hear speaking in tongues and glorifying God.**”

May we surround ourselves with neighbors who are open to hearing and seeing God's presence through each other. May we be so radically open to our lives being pruned by this wise Love of God – because Love is counting on us. Amen.

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