

### **Pruning For Fruit**

Proclaim his praises in the sanctuary right? Some of us are on the eve of the St. Matthew's golf-a-thon. With that in mind and in special dedication to Charlie and all the golfers, I want to share the following golf poem:

**In my hand, I hold a ball  
white and dimpled, rather small  
Oh, how bland it does appear  
this harmless looking little sphere.**

**By its size, I could not guess  
the awesome strength it does possess  
But since I fell beneath its spell  
I've wandered through the fires of hell.**

**My life has not been quite the same  
Since I chose to play this stupid game  
It rules my mind for hours on end  
A fortune it has made me spend**

**It has made me curse and made me cry  
I hate myself and want to die  
It promises a thing called par  
If I can hit straight and far**

**To master such a tiny ball  
should not be very hard at all  
But my desires the ball refuses  
and does exactly like it chooses**

**It hooks and slices, dribbles and dies  
and even disappears before my eyes  
Often it will take a whim  
to hit a tree or take a swim**

**With miles of grass on which to land  
it finds a tiny patch of sand  
Then has me offering up my soul  
if only it would find the hole**

**It's made me whimper like a pup  
and swear that I will give it up  
And take a drink to ease my sorrow  
but the ball knows I'll be back tomorrow!**

Stand proud you noble swingers of clubs and losers of balls. A recent study found that the average golfer walks about 900 miles a year. Another study found the golfers drink on average 22 gallons of alcohol a year. This means that on average golfers get about 41 miles to the gallon. Kind of makes you proud, that almost makes you feel like a hybrid. Give it up for all the golfers today.

Life can have so many different challenges, can't it? From something as simple as a golf game to maybe exercise to something that occurs in your life and in my life, to something that we don't even see coming. In fact, those are sometimes the most difficult challenges. Life in a very real way can be a test, as much as it can be joyful and wonderful. As much as it holds for us, some incredible life changing surprises. Life at times can be an incredible test for us.

In today's story in the Gospel, in John we read the famous parable that Jesus shares about the vine and the branches. In this particular story, Jesus shares that he is the vine, the father is the gardener and if you will, we are the branches. There is a beautiful picture that hangs in my office that a friend gave me, a fellow priest up in the DC area. You'll see this picture for me, is just a wonderful representation of this particular Scripture in John. It's a contemporary rendering of the arm of Jesus, of course the vine, with the branch of a grape cluster around it as well. For me and I trust for all of us, it is a wonderful reminder of this important Scripture that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. As we abide in him, we can bear some incredible and wonderful fruit.

In the story today, Jesus says that branches that bear fruit will grow. Ultimately, they will also be pruned as well. Now I don't know about you but pruning is painful. It is one of the things that when I go through it in life I do not like it. I don't enjoy it; I want it to be over with as soon as possible. Yet the reality is, as you and I are pruned in our life in the natural realm and in the spiritual realm, it is a positive sign actually. It's a sign that you're growing. It's a sign that you're bearing fruit and is a sign that the Lord loves you enough to shape your life and to cut away the things or the people in your life at that time so you can have even greater growth. So pruning is a good sign. It means you're being shaped for greater growth even though it may be incredibly painful and something very difficult to go through at the time.

Pruning means to trim back or to remove anything from relationships, activities, resources or possibilities. So that's what goes on in our life, it is painful, it is focused. You know what, we see this in Florida. This is the place of eternal sun; plants are growing all the time. One of the big jobs to have here Florida is to be a landscaper, especially here in Naples. They're out trimming and cutting all the time. There are even specialties of people that go out, trim our plants, trim our trees, and trim everything in order to do it just right. They know just what branch to cut and how to ensure even greater growth of the plants and trees by the pruning that they do.

You know in this parable today that you and I read in John, it talks about God being the gardener. So I want to invite you along with me to think about this image of God the gardener, he's walking through his vineyard if you will, and he's looking at the different branches that are there; that would be you and that would be me. He's observing the fruitfulness that is taking place. He might observe on your particular branch that there is a dead sprout or two that needs to be cut off or something that's not really bearing fruit that well, and so he'll prune that back. Then the rest of your branches can grow even more fruitful and be even more productive. So for you and I in this parable, what you and I need to realize is that God is the gardener. God is looking at our lives. God is observing what is taking place as

we are attached to Jesus the vine. And he is actively involved in our lives pruning and shaping us for the best growth that God could have in our lives and want for us.

You know one of the first things I did when I came here as rector at St. John's about seven years ago now about a year into my ministry here, I lead the vision of vestry on a retreat where we focused on a book called, 'Simple Church'. It was a book that had this very simple premise. That was the church have become too complicated. That it had amassed so many different goals, projects, mission statements, plans, philosophies and everything, that it had become so complicated that it wasn't really able to do much of significance. The answer for the church at this moment in history was to simplify, to focus, to prune back and to trim. So that's what we began to do as a vestry and began to pray into what our vision statement would be.

You'll notice in your bulletin each week in the back by the announcements usually at the top, there's a statement: Embrace God - with a definition. Love your neighbor - with a little definition. Then 'Serve the world' - with a little definition. That is our mission statement. That is our vision. That is our goal. That is everything that this church is about. Embrace God. Love your neighbor. Serve the world.

Let me share with you; I used to have notebooks full of goals and below those goals were action plans to realize those goals. Then there were overarching mission statements. Then there was this and there was that. It was like I had a whole bookshelf just to be able to realize the goals and the visions of the particular place I was at or the life that I was living. I got rid of all of that. I threw all of that away. There's nothing wrong with goalsetting. There's nothing wrong with planning. I want to share with you something that I found to be even more powerful. That is simplifying. Making first things first. Cutting it down to the absolute most concise statement of vision that you can have. For us in this place, it is to embrace God. To love our neighbor. To serve the world. To focus in on that. You know in that book, 'Simple Church', one of my favorite illustrations is shared by a man by the name of Steve Jobs. I'm sure many of you heard of him. He's the founder of a company named Apple. In that book, in that particular section about simplicity, Steve Jobs shared something that has stayed with me ever since I read it. He said, "One of the most important things that they did at Apple from the very beginning was that it was as important for them what they said "No" to as much as what they said "Yes" to." Do you hear that today? It was as important for them to say, "No" to certain things, as it was set as it was to say, "Yes" to others. You see, that's what pruning is all about. That's why this small company named Apple could be as huge and as great as it could be, because it had a very simple focus in terms of what it was trying to do.

The same is true for your life and promote my life as we are open to God the gardener shaping and pruning our lives, we will brought to a place of incredible simplicity, of incredible focus that God can use our lives in incredible and fruitful ways. That is exactly what God wants to do.

Let me ask you a question here today. Are you being pruned? Are you being pruned in your life? You'll know you are being pruned because you won't like it. You'll be fighting it. You'll be struggling with it. It will be painful. It might be a relationship. It might be something in your life that you really want to do. Usually if God is trying to prune something in your life, you'll have been fighting God for a long time. Let me just make a confession here in my own life. I have been fighting God in two particular areas for most of my life because I don't want him to prune those areas, but low and behold, I'm preaching this message this week. He is really driving it home even more, thank you very much! Pruning is hard. Pruning is difficult as God focuses in on the relationships of your life. On the finances of your life. On

the priorities of your life. On the direction of your life. On the place that God wants to take you in your life. Pruning will be involved. Can I just make a suggestion from someone who has not really done well with this? What I've learned...give up! The sooner you give up the better it will be for you. Let God the gardener prune you. The sooner you and I allow God the gardener to prune us, the more we can begin to move from a life of regret to a life of fulfillment. Pruning is hard but it is the most important thing that you and I can yield to because it is exactly in those areas where God is bringing in his snippers to prune you in that specific place in your life that most needs his attention. Would you agree with me, that God knows your life and my life better than we know ourselves? Would you also agree with me that since that is the case, since he's the gardener of you, there is a branch that he knows specifically that needs to be cut away as specifically, what needs to be focused on for greater growth that you might fulfill completely and fully the destiny he has for you. Endure what God the gardener wants to prune in your life; be open to it, the pain of it, the struggle of it, the loss of it. All that that is, it's true, it's real and it exists. Be honest about that.

Secondly, I want to invite us to be open to let Jesus the vine feed us in the midst of that pruning. As you and I are going through the pruning experience in our lives, be open to the Lord feeding you and feeding your spirit. You know as you and I surrender to the pruning that is going on in our lives, Jesus is going to give us even greater grace. There is a grace. There is a mercy. There is a love. There is a strengthening as you and I follow the Lord Jesus Christ. God blesses us as we follow him. As much as we don't enjoy his blessing when we don't follow him. So, there is a grace and a mercy in that. Be open to the reflection he gives you. Be open to the revelation that you receive in the Scriptures, in prayer and in your life in general about why God is doing this in your life. Why is that relationship ending? Why is this thing that you wanted to do so much being taken away from you? The Lord will speak to you about that. He will speak to you tenderly and lovingly. That will be strengthening for you.

Thirdly let me say, let the Holy Spirit's power increase sovereignly in your life. What you and I will find is that as we are pruned in our life, in different relationships, in different things, in different aspects of our lives, that there are things that are trimmed away. That there is a sense of death and pain that comes with that. Eventually there is also a sense of life. There is also a sense of greater energy, which you will find like you would find on any plant that is pruned in taking care of. When you go back and look at it later on in the season, it has even greater growth. It looks better than it did before. It is a plant that has been taken care of and is fulfilling its potential. The same will be true for you and for me. God is pruning you and me for greater growth to do even greater things than you and I could even begin to hope for or imagine. We just need to be open to the process and allow that fruitfulness to come. What I would encourage you and I to do is that as we have gone through this pruning process in our lives and as God is cutting away this and that, and as we are reflecting on where we are at... at the end of that time, what remains? What remains in your life? Who remains in your life? How is God calling forth greater growth into those areas? How is God to bless those relationships and those remaining gifts that you have? My experience has been He will bless them greatly. He will increase them. He will anoint them. You see this is the greater growth that God always had envisioned for your life and in my life as well. Get ready to produce even greater fruit in your life as the Lord prunes you and me and shapes us for the greatness that God has for us. Life can be a struggle. Life can be a pruning experience. Life can be like showing up on a golf course. You're wondering why you're there. Life can be something far greater than that. You and I are open to the loving presence and possibilities that Jesus Christ has uniquely for our lives. Lives that are full of power. Lives that are full of anointing. Lives that the been

shaped and cared for, molded and anointed in such a way that they are such beautiful, beautiful beings as people come in touch with them that the anointing and the fruitfulness from their life is just heavenly.

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