

Sermon 2012 Easter 5
May 6, 2012
Text: John 15:1-8
Theme: "Pruning is Painful"

Life in the vine is not about being left alone. A branch of a vine is completely dependent upon the rest of the branches and the rest of the branches are completely dependent upon it? So there is no concept of independence for a branch of the vine. It needs the other branches to receive nourishment from the roots and the roots need it convert sunlight and send it down.

We like to think of ourselves as independent. Teenagers can't wait to get out from under their parents authority. The aged mourn the loss of their cars and their mobility. In the middle years, most of us have a boss or a board or some group who we need and yet we resent. Independence is a false dream. We are never really independent. I believe John Donne said, "No man is an island unto himself."

Life in the Church is also not about being left alone. We like to think sometimes that the Church is a club to which we choose to belong but to which we have no particular obligation. I might belong to a political party but I don't want them calling me all the time or demanding my attention. I might belong to a civic club, but once I do whatever I do there, leave me alone. That's not the Church. The Church is a family, not a club and not a business.

First of all, you didn't join the Church. You might think you joined the Church. There might have even been a ceremony where they said you joined the Church, but you did not join any church. God grafted you into his body at your Baptism. The Church is the body of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit reached through the water and grabbed you and attached you to the vine which is Christ's body.

Second, because you are now grafted into the vine, you will be attended to by the vine dresser, Jesus, and that means being fed, watered and nurtured – but that also means being pruned. That's the hard part. We like to be fed and watered. But pruning is painful. We don't even like to admit that we have dead limbs hanging off of us and we certainly don't like them being cut off because it hurts but pruning is necessary for a healthy vine.

Please understand that this is not a choice. It is just the way it is. People often run away from the vinedresser and think they can hide their dead limbs. We hide our sins and we justify why we had to sin or why the person against whom we sinned deserved it. One might well think:

"Mind your own business. What business is it of yours if I have dead limbs hanging off my vine? You churchy busybody!" The problem is that if a sick branch is not removed, the whole plant suffers. We have all had shrubs that get out of control and become

woody and ugly and then when we finally get around to pruning them they look horrible and sometimes they die. A little constant pruning is far better than waiting too long. We all know people who had cancer growing in them too long. When it was finally discovered, the damage was too severe for survival.

The Church is no different. If Jesus, the vinedresser, were to ignore sick or dying parts of the vine, the whole vine would suffer and perhaps even die. Sin is just like cancer, eating and destroying everything good and leaving behind nothing but death and ruination. So Jesus prunes us. But pruning is always painful. Sometimes it is no more painful than pulling a hair out. But sometimes it feels like cutting off a limb with no anesthesia and there is very little we can do to numb the pain. The wound must be healed with the Gospel: with love and forgiveness.

When the pruning happens, Jesus does not appear before us and supernaturally prune us with magic loppers. He uses the Church, which is his body on earth. That is why I preach Law as well as Gospel. The Law always cuts and the Gospel always heals. The Law is what God demands of you and where you are failing. The Gospel is the promise of forgiveness through Jesus' death on the cross for our sins. When you are offended by God's Word, I have done my job of pruning. When you are irritated that your brother or

sister has brought your sin to your attention they have done their jobs. When you are challenged by the Church to give more faithfully, to walk more humbly, to live more righteously and to love all people without qualification, you are being pruned by Christ through his body and it is good for you and it is good for the whole body.

Like the Ethiopian Eunuch, we are drawn in by the Word of God and grafted into the vine through Baptism. We are motivated to hear the Word and receive the Supper and therein lies our strength to withstand the constant pruning. The pruning makes us powerful saints of God. The Gospel heals us from the pruning and feeds our growing faith. Pruning is painful. There is no doubt of that. But pruning and healing is also how God grows us and makes us purer, holier and stronger as we move through this valley of the shadow of death on our way to the Promised Land.