

Jeff's reflection: 'Pruning in Process'

After reading this week's scripture, I did a google search for 'Christian t-shirt slogans'. Amongst the ones I found were t-shirts that say: 'Jesus; the way, the truth, the life'; 'Saved with amazing grace' and 'Faith it!'

As I read this week's lectionary reading from the gospel of John, it occurred to me that maybe everyone who follows Jesus should be given a t-shirt on which appear the words:
'pruning in process'!

In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus is doing that Jesus-thing of teaching his disciples by means of a metaphor, an example drawn from life that somehow relates to us and Jesus and God.

In this case, Jesus says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower."

Which is a nice image of God caring for Jesus.

But then Jesus says that this little example is not just about the vine, it's also about the branches that start to grow out of the vine. Those branches bear the fruit. So if a branch isn't bearing fruit, the vine grower removes it. But if it is growing fruit, then the vine grower prunes it – cuts it back – so that it will continue to produce even more fruit.

In case anyone is a little confused, Jesus clarifies, saying, "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."

Nice story. Nice illustration. The disciples are probably feeling pretty good at this point, because they are with Jesus, they are his friends, they are the branches, so they will bear fruit...their lives will mean something...they...

Wait a minute... back up a moment.

So, if they don't stay with Jesus, they become branches that get cut off the vine. That doesn't sound good. BUT, if they stay with Jesus, the vine grower – that's God, right? – will regular prune them – that means some part of them still gets cut off, not just once but regularly – that doesn't sound good either. Where's the upside in this?

Jesus here is saying what Jesus has said in other ways throughout the gospel accounts – anyone who would follow me must pick up their cross, if you want to be first you must be last, blessed are you when people persecute you because of your association with me...

Deciding to follow the way of Jesus is not an invitation to 'easy street'. Jesus was clear – to follow him is to participate in God's ongoing action of love in the world, but there will be people and systems and structures that don't want God's love loose in their world.

Jesus is also saying that that God dwells in him and he dwells in God. For Christians, you can't have Jesus without God and you can't have God without Jesus. You can't

have one without the other. If we want to know what God was up to in the world 2000 years ago, we look at Jesus. If we look at Jesus, we are looking at something that God was up to 2000 years ago.

Jesus is saying that his life is grounded in God, that all he does is an expression of the life of God he experiences and releases into the world and that anyone who follows him will be opening themselves to God's presence in the world and in their individual lives and will now also be agents of God's love in the world, agents of God's presence in the world, agents of releasing God's presence into the world.

I don't think Jesus was saying anything about the validity of other faith traditions or practices. Jesus was not giving a comparative religion class. He was not saying that God's spirit is present in ONLY those who follow Jesus.

He was saying to these particular disciples, "You have been with me for the past months and I have been teaching you, showing you, mentoring you to be aware of God within you, within others, amongst us, in this world. I have shown you a way of befriending those who are struggling in this life, I have mentored you to be bearers of healing, I have shared with you meals and a table at which everyone is welcome, I have taught you that responding to violence with violence means that in the end, the only winner is violence. I have spoken of forgiveness of your enemies, of trusting that sharing can be a catalyst to abundance...

Jesus was saying to his disciples, "I have shown you a way of living in this world that immerses you in God's presence in this world. If you choose to break from this way, you will produce different fruit – if, for example, you choose to join the armed revolutionaries against the Romans, then you will perish by the sword. If you choose to try to protect your own self-interests and neglect the well-being of others, you will grow away from God."

"So, stay connected to all that I have taught and given you, because you will continue to experience a deeper and deeper awareness of God and a growing capacity to love.

BUT...but...God, the vine grower will also always be pruning you. There will always be attitudes and practices and opinions and ambitions that you will need to let go of and to surrender in order to continue to grow into this life in God.

This is in keeping with Jesus' Jewish faith tradition – in which rabbis and students of the Torah continue throughout history to imagine how commandments get lived out in their context. So, Jesus would often say "You have heard it said, but I say to you"...that word 'but' might be more insightfully translated as 'and' It was said that you shall not murder, and I say to you, do not even harbor or nurture anger at another. This is not a discarding of the original commandment, it's an interpretation that allows it to grow and bear new fruit in the current context.

Followers of Jesus have always faced the struggle of God pruning us
– pruning our acceptance of weapons of war as the best way to peace, allowing a new vision of peace through reconciliation to begin to come to fruition
-pruning us of our desire to make everyone be like us, instead leading us to embrace

God's diversity in humanity, to surrender our sometimes-unacknowledged attitudes and heritage of racial superiority; instead to affirm the gift of diverse ancestries and diverse gender and sexual orientations and identities

-pruning us of a reliance on retributive systems of justice that seek only to punish, instead learning of healing circles and practices of reconciliation

-perhaps, during this time of pandemic, pruning us from beliefs that church is a building where people gather to worship, and bringing to fruition an appreciation for other ways to worship together and a renewed understanding that 'church' is not a place but a community of resurrection people

We are pruned in order to be fruitful – or, as the apostle Paul might say – to bear the fruits of the Spirit – the fruits we have already mentioned that grow from our relationship to Christ – offering healing of body and spirit, practicing forgiveness, sharing food, sharing resources, seeing everyone as loved by God and as a bearer of the sacred, embracing non-violent resistance to oppression, pursuing the well-being of all people, practicing generosity and radical welcome and friendship.

Jesus says to us, "I am the vine. God is the vine grower. You are the branches...and if you stick with me you can expect God will be regularly pruning you...and you can expect to bear the fruit of God's love and God's new creation.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

For Reflection:

What are some attitudes/opinions God has pruned from you? What are some ways your understanding of the world or of God have changed during your life?

This sermon names some ways that followers of Jesus bear fruit. Can you name some others?

What practices or systems might God be telling us needs to change in the world today?