

Easter V
5/2/2021

CUTTING AWAY AND STAYING CONNECTED

The gospel today gives us two images, two opposite images: cutting away and staying connected.

Cutting away or pruning: *He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit and everyone that does, he prunes.* This is a beautiful but also graphic image. Pruning involves cutting away what is dead but pruning also involves cutting away part of the plant that's alive for the sake of the whole. Think of a long stemmed red rose. It's lovely but it has been pruned, more than once, you can say that it has been exposed to a certain amount of violence.

We know what pruning shears look like for plants but what about this divine pruning that Jesus speaks of? Those pruning shears are the Cross. What does pruning feel like? That's easy. It hurts. To share in the cross of Christ, to bear our cross daily, calls us out of ourselves. It calls us to be generous when we want be selfish, to be still when we want to complain, to bear our sufferings with patience uniting them with the sufferings of Jesus on the cross. It hurts when something is taken away, a position, a title, our dignity, our respect. It hurts when someone we love dies, particularly when it's a sudden and unanticipated death. It hurts because someone is truly cut off from us.

We can experience this pruning in big ways or, as our own St. Therese teaches us, in every little way. What do divine pruning shears look like? The Cross. What does it feel like to be pruned? It hurts. But it's important to ask the next question, what's the result of pruning? The answer is growth. Although it may hurt, the pruning is not meant to punish but to result in a greater good, to result in growth. A growth that is to glorify God and to bear much fruit as Jesus' disciples.

Jesus also tells us that his word prunes. It can cut away what needs to go whether it's dead or alive and there can be a lot in our own lives that needs to be cut away. Are you willing to let God's word prune you? Are you willing to let God's word cut away what is dead and even alive for your own good? Are you willing sometimes to do it yourself? What in your life needs to be pruned?

Pruning can be seen as a type of sculpture. Painting is an art that involves adding something. So often, sculpture is the *art of removing*. This divine pruning is like sculpture. It creates by removing. This isn't for its own sake but for growth and the glory of God.

So there's pruning but there's also staying connected: *Remain in me as I remain in you*. There's a story of a missionary working in a remote area without electricity. Eventually he was able to get some electrical current and a single light bulb gave some light to his tiny dwelling. The natives were fascinated by this and soon he saw them hanging light bulbs on string in their homes, but of course, there was no light. Yes, the light bulbs were there but they weren't connected to the energy source.

This is an illustration of *Remain in me as I remain in you* or *I am the vine, you are the branches*. Jesus is the source to whom, not to which but to whom, we must stay connected.

How do we do that? Well we do so in many ways. We do it by realizing that as is the case with our relationship with others, our relationship with God is living, dynamic and something that requires our attention and our effort, our self gift in love of God and love of neighbor. In other words, we have to work at it.

We stay connected through prayer, through some sort of daily prayer in harmony with our state in life. When we pray, we're called to do more than say words. We're called to ground ourselves in God's love and show what has been called hospitality of the heart. We do it by staying connected to the pruning and life-giving word of God that we find in the Bible.

We do it as St. John tells us in the second reading by believing, that it is by faith, by loving and by keeping God's commandments. This is something challenging if we take it seriously, something we do in love and faithfulness.

Faithfulness is different from compliance. Compliance is doing what you have to do, following the rules and that's not a bad thing. Faithfulness is not only doing what needs to be done but doing it with the heart and hopefully understanding why it needs to be done. Human commandments can be made for selfish reasons but God's commandments are always given out of love.

We also remain connected to Jesus through the sacraments. Each of the sacraments is a privileged point of connection. This involves both the sacraments we have received that we continue to live but continue to live and also the sacraments we receive with greater frequency.

In the Eucharist, that connection reaches a highpoint as Jesus comes to dwell not near us, not next to us but within our hearts. After each worthy Communion we can say with St. Paul, *It is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me*. Here the fruit of the vine becomes the blood of Christ. Here we seek to stay in right relationship we God and our neighbor

To be a Christian involves both being pruned and staying connected. That includes knowing what needs to be cut away and to whom we're to stay connected. You could sum all this up as living lives of intentional faith in big ways and in every little way.

Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, he calls us not to something static but to a living, organic relationship with him. This relationship sometimes involves the pain of pruning away but doing so ultimately at the service of life. Let us ask for the grace to be a people of prayer, for the courage to be pruned with the divine pruning shears of the cross and of God's word. We remain connected so that we may bear much fruit and so that in the midst of all that, God may be glorified.