

Providence Presbyterian Church
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Psalm 80 and John 15: 1-17

The first time I saw someone prune a shrub, I did not understand. I was a teenager. At a church workday in the spring, we were cleaning up the debris from a winter of snowplowing and getting the grounds spruced up. And Bill McCune, a generally likable guy, stood there and absolutely devastated a shrub with electric pruning shears. It was like watching a crime scene in plain sight, and no one was reacting. He took long swipes down the side, trimming off the green, and rather than relenting, he would go at it again and again. To my perception, he took a plump green shrub and whittled it down to twigs. I remember being shocked that no one stopped him. I was also a bit surprised in the months after as I watched it grow green again in its smaller figure, though I was still a little traumatized from watching Bill's brutality.

We think of growth sometimes in a steady line, like the way we want the stock market graph to look. Growth is a continuous upward line of improvement. We think in a steady line rather than cycles or seasons. So, in our continuous upward and outward mentality, trimming something down to its roots or some barren twiggy core does not compute. It looks like failure, or death, or something undesirable. And if we are supposed to grow in a steady line, what do you do with the pruned back bush, the perennial trimmed down to the ground for the long winter, the green tree gone brown?

This is where the agricultural lens is helpful. Growth is part of a season of greening and growing, fruitfulness, and then pruning and going dormant before renewing growth in the spring. Now, I realize that I have lived in places with four distinct seasons, so I think of all this in the cycle of those four seasons. Plants lose their green and their fruit. Certain plants will have to be replanted in the spring. But, despite the brown and gray winter, life will return. And more so, the pruning and lying dormant and the pairing back can bring better fruit at times, more fruit in other cases. But cutting back and pruning is a hard decision. I have not always been disciplined in the restraint gardening requires. Our poet this morning writes, "It's sad to cut back the old flower heads / to reach in and cut the green but errant branches."

Holly often tells me that I plant the tomatoes and cucumbers too tightly when we plant our garden. You see, Holly grows all these starters in the house, and so we have too many. And lacking confidence our little starters will become big plants,

we buy a couple sure-bets from Phelan's gardens, the local nursery. So when we plant the garden, there is not enough room for them all. But you don't know which ones are going to do well, right? What if you plant the wrong ones? So I am tempted to plant them all and see. But the problem is that they are all competing for the limited resources of the soil, and furthermore, they crowd each other as they grow, limiting each other's growth. So Holly will tell me, stop, I'll do it. But the funny thing is, she fell prey to the same fear this year, that the few we planted won't do well, so she planted more, and it became nearly as crowded. It is hard to trust the act of pairing back. We are afraid of failing, of missing out.

There are different reasons to prune or pair back. We might shape or try to contain or limit a tree or shrub from taking over your sidewalk or growing into the side of your house. But then there is the motivation of improving the health and the fruitfulness of the plant. By trimming, we might spur new growth. By limiting the branches, we direct the energy and resources of the plant to the branches that might be most fruitful. Growth, agriculturally speaking, is not a straight line.

What is more, lest you think pruning is just about clipping away the dead, guess what Steve Heald told us about growing peaches on the western slope. In our Ruminations conversation a couple of weeks ago, as we read today's scripture, Steve said that to get big juicy peaches on the western slope, you have cut off a whole slew of good buds. For if you don't reduce the number of buds, you'll get lots of small peaches. But if you are bold enough to cut off a bunch of good buds, to limit the buds that the tree's resources go to, you'll get those big juicy Palisade peaches we are used to. Our poet this morning writes, "It's sad to cut back the old flower heads / to reach in and cut the green but errant branches."

Sometimes the branches are green that we prune back. Sometimes it is the buds. Sometimes we have to not plant the hopeful tomato plant. Because the goal is fruitfulness, and fruitfulness requires the dormant season, and it requires choices, it requires faith, the faith when we wait and when we prune, the plant might come back strong, and it might produce better fruit.

One of the agricultural images that is used at different times in our scriptures is that of the vine. So when Jesus picks up the image of the vine in our gospel reading, he is drawing on an old trope. And in the Old Testament, Israel is God's vine. The vine planted is God's people, God plants and cares for the vine so that God's vine, God's people, would bear fruit. We hear it in Psalm 80 with the tones of love and affection, with pride and delight, with a sense that God lovingly planting, and God's vine flourishing.

You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
9 You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
11 it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.

The main thrust of this OT imagery is that God's people are supposed to flourish and be fruitful. That fruitfulness carries the sense of growth in numbers, flourishing as a people in community and mutual care, and being God's blessing to the world – that God's blessing and fruitful potential would flow through this vine. Israel is God's beloved; the vine that took deep root that filled the land.

But another aspect is often intertwined and expressed in this imagery, especially in the prophets and in the psalms. This aspect is a sense of sadness and wonder of what went wrong. How is it that this vine that God has planted and which flourished early has come to produce bad fruit? How is it that God's vine has grown wild and is no longer an expression of God's good intentions? They have grown wild, no longer listening, and connected to God's voice and will. And so one strain of this thinking is that God has to dig up the vine and start over. The vine will only produce bad fruit because you can pair it back, but when it comes back will the fruit improve?

Psalm 80 reflects the feelings of being distraught over the nation of Israel being conquered and beleaguered and praying that rather than uprooting altogether, God would restore that vine. Indeed, this is part of the human story, part of the biblical story, that God chooses and blesses, but as God's people, we go astray, we lose our roots, we stop listening, we lose our connection. We are blessed with love but produce fruit that is not in keeping with God's loving investment. And so, the hope and thrust of the biblical story is that God will restore.

Jesus seems aware of this negative potential, but he seems to lean heavier towards the hopeful fruitfulness and the practices that contribute to that. Jesus emphasizes taking care of the vine and the necessary connections so that the plant can produce good fruit.

As we begin the church's stewardship season, I want to think of stewardship through agricultural terms. Yes, I know that the budget and pledges are where this season in the church ends. But by focusing on the image of the vine, on agricultural

image, it steers our attention to where Jesus puts his emphasis. His hope and aim expressed repeatedly is what: that we might bear fruit. To steward the vine is not about just keeping it alive or growing for the sake of growing, it is about the care and the choices that contribute to its fruitfulness. Rather than feeling the weight of needs, we might start to trust the vine's potential and play our part.

The language of the vine and agriculture is metaphoric to a degree. By this I mean, drawing from agriculture to say something about non-agricultural things. However, the agricultural lens is appropriate because I think of the church, and community and relationships as organic. They are living things. They grow, they flourish, they go dormant. They have a possibility that has to be nurtured, and if you tread too heavily, you might trample and squelch. Community is organic, and it is also subject to the cycles of organic things. Growth is not in a straight line. And the hopefulness of the imagery of the vine for a church like Providence, whose growth has not been in a straight upward line, is that even when paired back to the main trunk, it can grow even more robust. It might grow bigger or may just produce better fruit.

We have had a couple potluck and discussion nights this fall, engaging in a process called appreciative inquiry. The reason I mention this is that Appreciative Inquiry shares a similar principle and belief. It asserts that there is a core to a community or to an organization. It asserts that change and challenges can stress a system, a community, or an organization. The best way to face these and to tap into its own resilience or possibility or imagination is to get back in touch with the core. It is kind of like pruning back to the main vine, like letting the roots rest expecting that core, that trunk, that main vine will grow again and produce fruit.

So that is the idea, in a season of much transition and change and uncertainty, we get back to the core of who we are, to attend to the vine so that it might produce fruit. Not just busy-ness or activity. Fruitfulness.

So Jesus picks up this old imagery of the vine and that is his focus – fruitfulness. That we might bear fruit. You see I think this is a helpful way to think about stewardship season. Because at the end of the day what is it that we are interested in, and what God is interested in? Is it not fruitfulness? God wants us to play our part in the work of pruning and tending and making choices so that our lives and our community and our church produces the fruit of God's grace. The fruit of the spirit that Paul talks of in Galatians – fruit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. The fruit of others wanting what Christ has to offer them. The fruit of love and justice, of loving one another as Christ has loved us. Verse 12 of our passage reads: "This is my commandment, that you love

one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends.”

Jesus emphasizes fruitfulness, and he talks about the work of pruning; pruning that leads to greater fruitfulness. But Jesus adds another twist on the tradition of the vine, another point of emphasis. He emphasizes the importance of connectedness. That we don't have the resources in ourselves to produce God's fruit. We are not the roots or the vine, we are the branches. We can only thrive and bear fruit as we are connected to the vine. Abide in me. Stay connected to the source, to the resources of faith and love and grace and goodness. You don't have it on your own. You must stay connected. Abide in me – stay connected – avoid the sick vine, the vine gone bad... but also be the vine that bears the fruit of the kingdom.

Abide in me. The way Jesus is speaking here shifts this tradition of the vine. In the Old Testament tradition, the vine that we stay connected to is Israel. Here, Jesus says that “I am the vine.” It is through Jesus that we get the resources to grow and bear fruit. Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches that when connected and healthy, may produce fruit.

Now another aspect of agricultural imagery that I like is that the fruit tells its own story. You can stand next to a tree and tell me it is a peach tree, and I may not know enough to say differently until it starts producing apples. Jesus will say elsewhere that you know a plant by its fruit and that they will know if we are Christians by our love. Fruit comes naturally from the health and nature of the plant.

The scriptures play with these images even as Jesus does here. They are drawing off of certain aspects of the vine, even as I have been drawing off of certain aspects of agriculture. I say playing with, because it doesn't all compute in a clear diagram. We are drawing on different aspects of vines and agriculture. But what is consistent is the desire for connection and for fruitfulness.

And in the season of stewardship, meaning how we steward, care for, utilize, or maximize our care for what God has given us, the question is how we care for the organic aspects of our lives and our church community in such a way that produces fruit.

This is true of our individual lives. In the theme of re-assessment, we consider if this branch, our personal lives, is producing the fruit we want. And if not, how do we tend to prune, amend the soil we are planted in, redirect the resources, perhaps.

How we care for ourselves so that we might produce the fruit God desires, that we desire?

And this is true of our church. This month-long season is an opportunity to pay attention to the vine, to our connectedness, to get back to the core and to imagine the fruit that we wish to produce. Because that is the aim—not just survival or growth for the sake of growth, but fruitfulness. And perhaps a question that runs through this season, is do we have vision and faith for the church, for this church? Do we have the vision and the energy to invest with the hope of a new season of fruitfulness? And if so, how we do attend to these dual values that Jesus expresses: connectedness to Jesus as the life-source, and attentive to the pruning and care necessary to producing fruit.

Our poem speaks of that hope and imagination that is a part of all this, of playing our part, doing our stewarding, with a vision for why it matters.

“It’s sad to cut back the old flower heads
to reach in and cut the green but errant branches,
but I feel freer as I reveal the shape that I imagine
when double the fullness comes back next year.
As the flowers come into bloom, it will draw the eye
and lift the heart.”

The psalmist closes with a similar note of hope, for connectedness and fruitfulness:
“give us life, and we will call on your name / Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; /
let your face shine, that we may be saved.”

So we reassess. How is our connectedness to the vine that is Christ? How is our fruitfulness, and how may we nurture it in hope?

Psalm 80

Prayer for Israel's Restoration

To the leader: on Lilies, a Covenant. Of Asaph. A Psalm.

- 1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
- 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might,
and come to save us!
- 3 Restore us, O God;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
- 4 O LORD God of hosts,
how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears,
and given them tears to drink in full measure.
- 6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors;
our enemies laugh among themselves.
- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.
- 8 You brought a vine out of Egypt;
you drove out the nations and planted it.
- 9 You cleared the ground for it;
it took deep root and filled the land.
- 10 The mountains were covered with its shade,
the mighty cedars with its branches;
- 11 it sent out its branches to the sea,
and its shoots to the River.
- 12 Why then have you broken down its walls,
so that all who pass along the way pluck its fruit?
- 13 The boar from the forest ravages it,
and all that move in the field feed on it.
- 14 Turn again, O God of hosts;
look down from heaven, and see;
have regard for this vine,
15 the stock that your right hand planted.
- 16 They have burned it with fire, they have cut it down;
may they perish at the rebuke of your countenance.

- ¹⁷ But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,
the one whom you made strong for yourself.
- ¹⁸ Then we will never turn back from you;
give us life, and we will call on your name.
- ¹⁹ Restore us, O LORD God of hosts;
let your face shine, that we may be saved.

Jesus the True Vine

John 15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹ As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹ I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³ No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵ I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶ You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷ I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.