

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (2024 - B)

(Revised from 2000)

My Dad was never interested in gardening or yard work. His thing was mechanics. He was always puttering in his shop, making things or fixing things. However, one time he read something about making wine, and he got interested in the idea. In fact, he became so interested that he went to the garden store and bought some grape vines which he planted in our yard. He also learned how to care for them, and they were the only things he tended to in the yard.

After a couple of years, there were enough grapes for him to make wine, and he did that for several years, but then one year there was a bumper crop and Mom made grape jelly with the extra grapes. After that Dad got out of wine making because he liked Mom's jelly better.

Over the years, not only did my Dad learn about grape vines, but I picked up a few things too. For example, grape vines have a main stem from which all of the branches grow, and that stem is firmly rooted in the earth. In fact, you can cut everything back to that stem and the vine will not be harmed. Instead, it will just produce new branches and fruit.

Another thing I learned is that you have to cut back the branches or canes each year if you want to get a good crop of grapes. That's because the older branches don't produce anything but leaves and after that, they just die back and take up space. On the other hand, when you cut back and prune the old branches, you get lots of new growth and more grapes.

Now, when Jesus taught the people, He always used examples they understood, and one thing they understood were grapes. Vineyards were common throughout the area. So, when Jesus said, "**I am the vine, you are the branches,**" the people all thought of the vineyards around them. They thought about how grapes grew only from the branches that were healthy and about how the vines needed to be pruned each year.

However, the point our Lord was making was not about gardening. It wasn't about how to get better yields from grape vines. No, the point Jesus was making had to do with the spiritual life. It had to do with how we can get closer to God, and how to be better people. So, with that in mind, let's take a closer look at what Jesus said.

First of all, Jesus said that He is the true vine. In other words, He is the root and the stem of the spiritual life. Nothing else can grow unless it is connected to Him. Thus, just as a branch cut off from a vine is dead or will soon die, so too someone cut off from Christ will also die spiritually.

Next, Jesus said that we are the branches and not the stem or roots. In other words, we receive our spiritual life from Him. We cannot exist on our own any more than a branch cut off from the main stem and roots can live on its own.

This works for other plants too. You can cut a branch from lilacs or plums and put them in water, and the leaves and flowers live for a while, but then they start to wither and die. So too with someone who is cut off from the Lord. His or her spiritual life will soon wither and die.

One more thing Jesus said is this. He said, **“My Father is the vine grower.”** In other words, God the Father is the one who tends the vine. It is the Father who tends to us and prunes us by cutting away those things that hinder our spiritual growth. The Father does this so that we can bear spiritual fruit, so that we can grow in faith, hope and love.

Now, let's dig some more into what Jesus said. Just like grape vines, we are all going to be pruned in life. Things to which we are attached will be cut away, and this pruning is going to hurt. You know, plants that are pruned leak sap; they bleed for a while, but then the wound heals over, and they grow stronger. So too with us.

Because of original sin, being good is hard for us. Adam and Eve's sin left our human nature injured and weakened. The old catechism put it this way: It said Original Sin darkened our minds, weakened our wills and left us with a strong inclination towards evil.

With our darkened minds, we often forget we are creatures made by a Creator to whom we owe everything including worship. We also forget we were made by God to live with Him in heaven. So instead of setting our sights on getting to heaven, we get wrapped up in earthly things, and focus on the here and now rather than on the hereafter.

Because our wills are weak, we struggle to do what is right. We give in to temptations. We take the easy way out instead of taking care of our obligations and responsibilities. We go with the flow instead of holding on to the truth.

So, to overcome these weaknesses in us, the Father prunes us. Just like pruning the old stems from the vine, so the Father will prune us.

For example, the Father may allow someone who has grown attached to material things to lose them in a fire or some financial crisis. Then, without the things he loved so much, that man might come to realize his family and his God are what really matters and all the things and stuff he had were not as important as he thought.

Perhaps the Father will prune someone by allowing their health to deteriorate. They may have been strong and powerful, but then, all of a sudden, they become as weak as a baby. Through this suffering, they may come to realize they can't do anything without God and that they weren't meant to live here on earth forever.

God prunes us in many ways, and each time He does so, it hurts. It upsets us, but it also causes us to look at our lives and to make changes. Sometimes the pruning is minor. We might be told of some fault or habit we have and be given the chance to change or make amends.

Sometimes the pruning is major as when a person comes down with a terminal illness or suffers from a divorce that wasn't their fault. These major prunings cause us to reexamine our lives and all of the assumptions we hold.

However, in all of this, when we are being pruned, it's essential that we realize when the Father is pruning away the dead and dying branches of our lives, in every case, it's always for our own good. These prunings help us grow stronger in our spiritual life, and later on, when we look back, we can indeed see how these prunings have helped us to grow. So, when we suffer unexpectedly, we need to realize God is getting us ready for new spiritual growth.

Now, let me make one last point. There are some people who, in spite of God's pruning grace, do not bear fruit. Sometimes on my Dad's vines, there were whole branches that died, right down to the main stem. People who bear no spiritual fruit are like these dead branches. They are of no use to anyone.

We become dead branches when we continue to live in sin. We become dead branches when we continue to offend against the love of God or neighbor in serious ways and without repentance.

Habitual mortal sin hurt us spiritually. It cuts us off from God, and we become dead branches that bear no fruit. Then like the dead branches on a vine, there is nothing left to do but cut them off toss them into the fire.

One of the most disturbing things I have ever encountered was a man I met as a young priest. This man was registered in the parish, but he never went to Mass.

So one day I went to his home to visit him. As we were talking, he told me he thought religion was a joke and had believed that since he was a teenager. He told me of how he had done things to mock religion throughout his life, and then he laughed.

Later on, this man died at home, without the sacraments. It was in the middle of the night, and I was called to say some prayers. I remember going into the home and seeing him there dead, but more than that, I could feel the presence of evil around him and in the home.

It reminded me of our Lord's words today when He said, **"Anyone who does not remain in me will be thrown out like a branch and wither; people will gather them and throw them into a fire and they will be burned."** There are a lot of dead branches in the world today ...

On the other hand, Jesus then said, **"Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit ... By this is my Father glorified, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."**

So, then, when the Father is pruning us, when we are suffering, let us realize that even when it hurts, it is so that we can bear more fruit, so that we can grow in faith, hope and love, and so that we can glorify our heavenly Father and by doing so gain everlasting life. Amen.