

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2015

Maybe you've heard the story about the rabbi, with a boisterous congregation, who always began his weekly sermon with a sacred story. One week, a man from his congregation stood up and said: "We've heard that one." The rabbi asked the man, "Did you pray today?" The man said: "Yes." Then the rabbi asked, "Did you pray yesterday?" Again the man said, "Yes." Finally, the rabbi asked, "If you prayed yesterday, why did you pray today?" If this little story leaves you just a bit perplexed, then consider this: sacred texts are not about conveying information or even about imparting knowledge. They are more like prayer. Every time we ponder them, no matter how familiar they are, they have the habit of ushering us into the presence of God.

Today's appointed gospel about the vine and the branches is very familiar to all of us. We know, or we have heard, that grape growers prepare for winter by pruning, butting back the branches on the vines so that the plant's growing power is directed to producing grapes instead of just longer branches. Jesus uses this simple horticultural metaphor to teach us that the power to grow spiritually comes from the Father through Him, the vine, to us, the branches. In order to bear much fruit, to become the people we were created to be, we must be pruned.

The first question for us is this: how am I pruned? Jesus gives one example. I am pruned by the Word of God. Jesus redirects the energy I give over to fear, to pride, or even to sadness, by reminding me to trust in God instead of myself, to have confidence in God's loving plan for me. I am also pruned by relationships. In friendship and community, in apostolic service and prayer, I face the truth of my own selfishness and prejudices, and discover the growth and joy that come when I set them aside. I am pruned, too, by suffering and the losses of loved ones, by diminishing health and dreams unfulfilled – all these prune me of what is fleeting and redirect me to what is lasting.

The second question for us is this: am I in this vineyard all by myself with Jesus, the true vine? Assuredly not! I am not the only branch on the vine. Abiding with Christ cannot be done alone. A solitary Christian is a contradiction in terms. I need a community of God's people to pray and work with me when I'm able, and to pray and work for me when I'm not. What does this mean for a parish community like ours?

Maybe we would like to remain on the parish sidelines, sit in the darkest corner, hope to remain invisible. Jesus, however, doesn't seem interested in helping us remain invisible. Through a parish community, Jesus makes inconvenient demands. The next thing you know, life just isn't the same any more. And that's the point.

As branches of Christ the vine, we are part of something greater than ourselves, something that transforms the hesitant fragility of our single selves. We bear choice fruit for one another and with one another, in Christ. When one of us cries, we can taste the salt. When one of us rejoices, we can catch the wind in our sails.

May it be so for you and for me. Amen.