

A message preached by Rev. Dr. Kenneth R. Downes at Trinity Church
Shelburne Falls, Massachusetts, on May 19, 2024

"Confessions of a Timid Pruner"

JOHN 15:1-8

I'm glad that I don't have to make my living as a farmer. I would end up starving because I lack the spine to tear out things that are dead. Part of the problem is that I get attached to my plants. I've kept plants in my home for a year after they died. In the middle of November when the first snow starts falling and my perennials have been withered for months, I still find myself hoping: "just leave them alone--maybe we'll have a warm-spell and they will perk up."

I don't think I've ever had good luck with roses because I don't prune them enough. I imagine how much it must hurt to have a part of you cut off. Ouch! Years ago, when I lived in Littleton, Mass., I had apple and pear trees that I never trimmed as much as I should have. The obvious result of my timidity was a diminished harvest and poorer quality fruit.

Over the past weeks we had some beautiful warm days, and I was outdoors walking around Shelburne Falls there were lots of people raking and picking up all the fallen branches from the winter. While observing this, I found myself reflecting on this Bible passage about the vine and the branches, and how nature has a way of maintaining and restoring itself. One could say that a harsh winter season is God's natural pruning that will make everyone's trees healthier and stronger during the coming year. The dead branches have been removed, leaving the healthy branches to become stronger.

I'm glad that I have some knowledge and appreciation for agriculture, because so many Bible stories use images that were relevant to a culture that survived by farming and ranching. How would I ever make sense of my faith if I could not appreciate the images of the Good Shepherd, the narrow gate, the lost sheep, the parable of the sower, and so forth. Jesus frequently used these agricultural metaphors to teach and challenge the crowds. Jesus would take a story about grapes, plants, sheep, or trees with the point being; "THIS IS REALLY ABOUT YOUR LIFE!"

For a moment, let's use our imaginations and go back outdoors and imagine that we are picking up dead sticks and thinking about the vine and the branches. As in most of Jesus' teaching, there are some difficult (hard) aspects to what he says. In this case, Jesus does not just talk about the *rewards* of being connected to God's Kingdom. He also warns of the *consequences* of being *unconnected*.

In this parable, Jesus makes it clear that it is God's desire that we remain connected to God. We are told that, if we do, our lives will be whole, resulting in abundant fruit.

However, it is also clear that those who remain apart from the vine will not receive nourishment. In fact, such a branch will wither up and die. It will be picked up by the gardener and thrown into the fire to be burned. In the arid climate where Jesus lived, firewood was scarce. Thus, everyone who heard this story would know that any branch cut off the vines would certainly wither, dry, and make excellent tinder for the cooking fires.

If you can now imagine me or you, with an arm-full of dead branches, perhaps you might begin to consider what this parable might mean for the dead branches in our lives...

Some questions to ponder:

- 1) If God is the gardener in this parable, and Jesus is the vine, does this mean that God comes along periodically to prune away the dead branches?
- 2) Is it possible that some of the hardships or challenges we face in life are a part of the pruning of our souls to enable us to grow and produce more abundant fruit?
- 3) Does God come along and prune away the dead branches that we have failed to prune ourselves?

Whoa!! As you can imagine, these thoughts were far more than I had bargained for when I was looking at people outdoors cleaning up their yards.

I know that I am not alone in my timidity when it comes to doing things that are difficult, but necessary. Perhaps you don't share my problem with plants, but I suspect that in your own life you may also be a timid pruner. Generally speaking, we all prefer to avoid conflict. We prefer comfortable routines and dislike the unexpected. And sometimes, our short-term avoidance mutates into debilitating long-term crises. Sometimes our inability to let go creates excess weight that pulls us down and holds us back. Let me share with you a few examples to make more concrete this dilemma of timid pruning.

Some years ago, I maintained a counseling practice. At that time, I was seeing a woman who was having a very difficult time separating from her 19-year old son. She was a single mother and she and her son had been on their own since he was 7, and together they had fled from the boy's abusive father. Sadly, the son had become as angry and as abusive to his mother as his father had been.

Scared of losing the only person she had left, this woman clung to this unhealthy relationship with her son. Intellectually, she knew that for both of them to grow up and to have a chance of developing more healthy boundaries and relationships, she must push him out of the nest—something she had been unable to do, up to that point. Her own sense of loss and failure was so great that she was paralyzed. She was incapable of doing the pruning which would transform her life and would help her son as well.

Sometimes, we are not able to prune our own branches and we have to wait until things get bad enough that we are forced to change—we have to wait until change becomes unavoidable. Starting 50 years ago, ecologists and climatologists started warning us that we HAD to start changing our patterns of consumption. Did we pay attention? Not really! Most voluntary efforts at trash and carbon emission reduction were minimally successful, or completely ignored. It has only been in the past 5 years when climate disruption and extreme weather events have increased, did we began in earnest this important work. And even now, there are still deniers who refuse to change behaviors and make different choices. There are still those who refuse to connect the dots between human carbon consumption and the negative environmental consequences on this sacred planet.

Another example: every day, you can see in the news how a lifestyle of inactivity or overindulgence in food, smoking, alcohol or drugs leads to a major physical illness. Often it is a heart attack, seizure or a stroke that will so shake up a person's life that they are able to finally do something about their destructive behavior—whatever it is. The good news is that many of these people are able to return to whole and productive lives, changed for the better by their traumatic experience.

I do believe that, sometimes, God has a way of pruning dead limbs from our lives that we cannot do ourselves. Sometimes, when we refuse to deal with a problem, God, in the fullness of God's love, shows us another way to achieve abundant living.

Hear me very clearly! I am not saying that I believe that God CAUSES bad things to happen to us. However, I am willing to suggest that—as a way of correcting and connecting us, God ALLOWS for things to happen which may challenge us or cause us pain.

My sermon's primary point affirms God's love and care for the children of God. I have come to believe that there are times in our lives when we are not capable of pruning away dead branches that hinder our spiritual journey. Because of *denial or fear or timidity*, we do not make the difficult but necessary choices. Like the winter storms that rip the dead branches from the trees, or like the gardener who cuts out the dead growth from the vines, so God deals with us.

Let me suggest to this congregation that the interim period (which you have been going through with Bridge-Pastor Kate Stevens and is coming near its end) is a great opportunity for pruning. The interim period can be very similar to a spring clean-up. If you really want to do it right, it requires some difficult and decisive decision-making. You have to look at all your branches and decide if there are some that are withered and are inhibiting new growth. These branches might be programs, policies, assumptions, or even people who are serving in the wrong place, or at the wrong time. Honestly, having been an interim pastor myself at many churches, let me say that if you do need to make this kind of organizational pruning, you DO NOT want to wait for a new pastor to do this difficult work. The best gift you can give a new pastor is to have put your house in order before they arrive, and that sometimes means gathering together any withered branches and lighting a match. Procrastinating, and trying to do that work "out of season" leads to unintended consequences you would rather avoid.

God is not a timid pruner. God knows that love often calls for discipline and firmness. God in God's love will prune our branches for us if we don't. God knows that it hurts. I believe God cries with us when the pain is almost more than we can bear. But God never leaves our side. God never pulls us away from the vine, the source of our strength. No matter how radically our branches may get pruned, Jesus, the source of our nourishment and comfort remains with US.

As you go home today, consider the following three thoughts:

First, try to remember some of the ways that God has lovingly, but firmly, pruned your life in the past. Celebrate in your heart those times, if you can.

Second, try to discern if there are branches in your life, right now, that are withered and need attention. In what ways might you be able to enrich and fertilize those withered places with new activities and relationships, or, is it time to prune and burn?

Finally, consider the branches of this church and the ways that you might more fully connect yourselves to the vine of Jesus Christ. Pray for the future health of this church and for the pruning that you may have to do together to achieve an even more abundant harvest. Amen.