

Fifth Sunday of Easter

GOD'S GREEN THUMB

John 15:1-8

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By Steven E. Albertin

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide 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. 5I 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. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

DIAGNOSIS: "Crop Failure"

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : "Fruitless"

The night was filled with uncertainty and danger. The disciples were concerned about their future relationship with Jesus, especially in view of his impending departure of which he was speaking so ominously on this night of his betrayal. Caught in such turmoil, the disciples couldn't think of anything but themselves. How could they "abide" in Jesus, how could they

remain connected to him, if he were to leave them? Paralyzed with such fear and anxiety, they couldn't think about any one or any thing else. All they could think of was themselves. So self-possessed, afraid that there was not enough to go around, they were fruitless, unable to produce any good fruit (good works) for anyone.

Given the threats and dangers of this world, we too can only focus on ourselves. So self-possessed all we can think of is the bottom line and "what's in it for me?" We have no time for others. Our lives become selfish exercises in self-aggrandizement. There is no time for our neighbor. Life is all about my pleasure, my success, my career, my security and me. The biblical concern for good works, for love of neighbor, for the fruit of faith, becomes scarce. Generosity is an unnecessary luxury. Focused only on the pursuit of our well being and security, our lives ironically become dry and fruitless.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *"Faithless"*

The disciples may have thought that they were just anxious about their relationship with Jesus. But Jesus raises the stakes and deepens the crisis. Their anxiety is not just about their relationship with him. Because of who Jesus is, the Son of the One he called his Father, this anxiety also reflects their increasingly shaky relationship with God. Failure to abide in Jesus is also a failure to abide in God. Failure to trust Jesus is failure to trust in God.

Like a branch that is disconnected from the vine, it cannot bear fruit. Disconnected from God means that one is disconnected from all of life. All of life is about God. All of life is about trust in God. If one does not abide (trust) in God, one will not abide in anyone or anything else either. For example, failure to keep the First Commandment means that you will break all the rest of the commandments as well. Luther made this clear in both

of his catechisms in the way he connected the First Commandment to all the rest of the commandments. The First Commandment is the clasp that unites all the rest of the commandments. Break any of the other nine commandments and you break the first as well. Break the First Commandment and you will break the other nine as well. Therefore, lifeless lives that fail to produce good fruit are first and foremost lives marked by distrust of God. Fail to trust God and the rest of life falls apart. No wonder Jesus says “apart from me you can do nothing.” Apart from trusting Jesus, everything that we do is broken and imperfect.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : “Lifeless”

Jesus begins to play hardball. He raises the stakes even more. What is at risk here is life, eternal life. Branches that fail to produce fruit must be eliminated. They wither and are thrown away. Even worse, they are thrown into the fire and burned. And that includes all of us. The fact that none of us “gets out alive,” is not natural or inevitable. That is not the way that life should be. That all of us die is a judgment and verdict on all of us because our lives have not been lived as they should have been. “Apart from me you can do nothing” means that God has a zero tolerance policy. It is all or nothing. Since we fail to “fear, love and trust God above all things,” since we do not abide in Jesus, since we are all too often disconnected from him, we have no place to stand, no case to make, no defense that matters. We are all “lifeless,” under judgment and destined to be “thrown into the fire and burned.” Despite our successes and accomplishments, the truth of the matter is that our lives are one big crop failure.

PROGNOSIS: “Bumper Crop”

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : “Pruned”

This desperate plight calls for dramatic intervention. And that is exactly what this vinegrower does. God is not content to “cut

his losses" and "slash and burn." Believe it or not, God loves this crop, this pathetic field of crop failures. So God resorts to painful but necessary intervention. God prunes. God cares enough to "cleanse" these plants of their withered, dying and shriveled branches so that the plants might be reinvigorated, so that they might once again thrive and bring forth much fruit. When the pruning shears come bearing down and slash away the shriveled and unproductive branches, it might appear to be painful and destructive, but in fact it is just the opposite. "Cleansed" of these shriveling branches the connection to the life-giving vine is strengthened. New life flows to the branches and much fruit comes forth.

That is at the heart of the message Jesus is leaving with his disciples on this night before his death. The next day this One who was "one with" all the shriveled and withered branches of this world would also be pruned. The cross would cut him off from the very life of God. Such must be the fate of the One who would take upon himself the sins of the world. He would suffer the very same fate of every other sinner, of every other withered and dying branch in this world. But the marvelous irony in all of this is that it is pruning and not simply destruction. This cutting and slashing would bring life. On the "third day" Jesus would be raised and it would be clear once and for all that the pruning that took place on the cross was not simply a cutting away, but also in the marvelous agricultural strategy of this magnificent gardener it was life-giving. This was God's way of reinvigorating, resurrecting and bringing new life to this branch that had lost its connection to the vine, to the life of God. Because of Him there is new life. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

In the Word and Sacrament ministry of the church, this pruning happens again and again. The shriveled and withering are pruned only to once again thrive. They die and rise again with Christ.

They go under the blade. They repent. They let go . . . and let God raise them up again. They are offered the opportunity to get reconnected to the real life of the universe. This is nothing less than the exercise of Law and Gospel.

Step 5: Advance Prognosis (Internal Solution) : “Prized”

Branches that seemed doomed and headed for incineration now discover under the gentle pruning of this determined vinegrower that they are indeed most “prized” possessions. It would take the disciples days, but eventually they would discover that not only Jesus’ suffering but their suffering was the only way to live. Such pruning at the hands of the vinegrower was not because they were so worthless, dried and withered but because almighty God had decided to love them despite the fact that they were most unlovable. They were not rejected but prized. They were the apple God’s eye. Once the “pruned” Jesus would appear in their midst and show them the marks of death in his hands, feet and side. Once Jesus could show them that he too had been pruned and was not dead but alive, they too could believe that the same was now possible for them. They too could be reinvigorated. They too could be reconnected to the vine. They too could now abide in Jesus and he in them. Because of this pruning, because they now could abide in Jesus, all things were possible. Now they could do everything, including what had seemed to be the most impossible of all: trust in God.

So also for us. We too discover that we are “prized” and not despised, we are resurrected from the ashes of our despair and self-pity. Now we believe that we were pruned not because God wanted to destroy us but rather because God’s love for us makes all the difference in the world. Apart from God and the faith in God that Jesus makes possible, we could do nothing. Our lives were lifeless and fruitless. But now, marvelously, miraculously, because Jesus (God) abides in us and we in him, we can do everything. God’s green thumb does amazing things.

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : “Productive”

God’s green thumb transforms withered and dying branches into productive and fruitful plants. Because Jesus abides in them and they in him, they trust God. They keep the First Commandment and find themselves keeping the others as well. Their lives bear the fruit of good works. Freed from always being obsessed with themselves, no longer anxious about their status with Jesus and before God, they are free to give themselves away and pour out their lives in service to their neighbor and the mission of the church. Such productive lives of good works are not the labored of efforts of something they “have to” do but blessed fruits of branches connected to the vine. They can’t imagine living their lives any other. Their good works are something they “get to” do, the spontaneous fruits of vines well tended by a God with a marvelous green thumb.

Likewise, our lives are changed and transformed. And ironically giving glory to God is not something we do by running off on some religious pilgrimage to some holy place or by fleeing the world in some self-chosen holy works of religious piety. Instead we give glory to God by bearing fruit and loving our neighbor in the ordinary callings and mundane places of our daily lives. And the greatest irony of all is that we (of all people!) become God’s green thumb in the world. Through us (God’s mission!) God reconnects the world to his love in Christ. And miraculously a withered and dying world begins to blossom. Because of God’s green thumb, a bumper crop begins to appear. We can begin to live lives filled with generosity and gratitude instead of always having to grab and hoard for ourselves. With a bumper crop there is always more than enough to go around. And because God is the One with this amazing green thumb, the bumper crop is certain to appear.