

Vine and Branches – Rev. Jennifer Adams  
May 10, 2009 Easter 5B

I need to tell you right up front that horticultural images are one of my greatest preaching challenges. “I am the vine and you are the branches,” we hear in today’s gospel. “Whoever abides in me, and I in them will bear much fruit.” I was born without either thumb being at all green and so – every now and then when I’m preparing a sermon, I actually wish that Jesus had been born into an athletic family. Just imagine how different the parables, the images in these stories would be? “I am the point guard, you . . .set the picks?” or how about “I am the quarterback – you are the wide receivers. Whoever runs my patterns and catches the passes will score many touchdowns.” Or maybe soccer would work the best . . .I’m sure it would. . .“I’m Center mid – and you’re the wings – whoever makes the right runs will score many goals.” Nice. . .but then I do have to ask where would it go from there. We’d probably end with something like “and those who don’t score goals will be cut from the team” or “those who drop the pass will be forever benched.” Not exactly good news, I guess. So, perhaps it is a good thing that Jesus came from an agricultural setting. Because ultimately, this whole thing isn’t about competition or winning is it; scoring a whole lot really doesn’t capture the gospel good news -- running the race maybe, but mostly the good news of Christ is about growth, something everyone can do and everyone does do in one way or another. And what better images to tell us about growth than vines or trees or seeds or as we sometimes hear about in these stories, even bodies. They grow too.

And no matter what your gardening skills look like you can probably relate to bearing fruit. We don’t need to make this too complicated. The fruit is the good we do in this world and it comes in many shapes and sizes. And like good fruit you tend to know this kind of good when you taste it; you usually know it when you do it. Broad categories of good taste like justice, peace, forgiveness, love, hospitality, self-care, self-sacrifice, reconciliation. And every branch is capable of producing these kinds of things and it happens around here all the time.

Now one of the amazing things about fruit is that when it’s eaten it actually leads to more growing, more health, more breaking open and scattering of seeds which in turn leads to more growing. So very simply put, when we share these kinds of good, when we produce these kinds of good and put them out into the world they leads to more. The process continues: seeds are planted, branches strengthened, vines enhanced.

But as this parable reminds us we don’t always do that. Which is why “pruning” is part of the parable too and part of any good growing process. The appropriate cutting back that is pruning produces strong, healthy, beautiful plants. We all have stories of what in retrospect we would call our pruning stories -- those experiences we probably would not have brought on ourselves but that in the long run did the kind of cutting that enhanced our lives, deepened our faith, helped the fruit that is ours to grow. God is always caring for us, working on us, helping us be the kind of branches we have been called to be.

I also read something interesting this week that spoke to me about the business of our lives: an un-pruned branch or vine will initially produce more growth than a pruned one will– up to ten times as many more shoots per year. So at first glance, an un-pruned vine appears to be more

productive, it appears to be “doing more,” and technically, quantitatively, it’s making more fruit. You can see the temptation here, it’s a trap that we can all fall into. But the problem comes when the season goes on, and the many, many leaves suffer because the energies of branch have been spread too thin, there isn’t enough to go around. So the unpruned branch appears to have the edge early in the season, but over the long haul it produces a whole lot of weak, unhealthy fruit. One article said, “The fruit’s quality can be so poor that it’s hardly worth using. And [besides the immediate effect,] the crop of an un-pruned vine the next year is sure to be poor.” Pruning produces strong, healthy, beautiful plants. Our cutting back and being cut back is necessary in order for us to produce the kind of fruit that truly, healthily serves us and our church and our world.

And so this week, I encourage you to watch the growing that is happening out there – it’s a wonderful time of the year for us to hear these kinds of stories. There is blooming happening everywhere around us and the fruit is on its way. We live among some master gardeners whose blueberry bushes, and apple trees, and flowers and fields of corn have much to teach us. And as you go about noticing the amazing growing things outside, look inside too - and ask yourself if your level of production is leading to the kind of good things our world needs. Are you contributing gifts that look like justice, peace, compassion, self-caring, self-sacrifice, forgiveness, hospitality, love? Or are you overproducing so that your quantities are high but the fruit, not what it could be? And pray for the kind of pruning we all need now and then, and know that the Vine of all Vines is always with us, providing guidance, grounding, and nourishment. And that in Him we will WIN, WIN, WIN. . . I mean grow, grow, grow, giving ourselves and the world some good, life-giving sorts of fruit.