

The Fifth Sunday of Easter – John 15:1-8
St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Sedona Arizona

“Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

I'm not much of a gardener. Some might say that I have a brown thumb because I'm not very good at even growing house plants. But I appreciate green and growing things, like trees and flowers. I used to help my dad in the garden by watering his rose bushes. I would move the garden hose from one rose bush to another until every plant had its fill of water. That was back in the old days before drip irrigation systems. It took a good amount of time, but I liked hanging out with my dad and watching him tend the beautiful flowers that would eventually grace our dining room table. And yet, I thought it was counterintuitive to prune the rose bushes so that they would bear flowers more abundantly. The plants looked woefully bare after all the cutting and trimming. But sure enough, pruning nurtured their growth and wellbeing.

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus tells his disciples that, as the vine grower, God prunes every branch that bears fruit to make it bear more fruit. God lovingly nourishes the branches through Jesus the true vine. This divine nourishment comes through the Word of God; the abiding presence of Jesus and his teaching and ministry in the world. Jesus' words, and his very being, cultivate disciples that are inspired and empowered to bear fruit. The disciples are being nurtured by witnessing Jesus' healing ministry of compassion and grace. And they are being pruned and cleansed by following God's commandments, especially Jesus' commandment to love one another as he has loved them.

But Jesus' time with the disciples is growing shorter. This scene is the beginning of Jesus' farewell discourse; a lengthy final teaching about his abiding presence and love for the world. It is a pastoral message of everlasting love that extends through his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion, and beyond his resurrection. While this message is both comforting and confusing to the disciples, Jesus maintains his promise to abide with them always. He uses the familiar imagery of the vine grower and vineyard to share God's vision for God's creation: that by nurturing our interconnected relationships, we all may flourish and bear fruit abundantly.

Bearing fruit is often interpreted to mean doing good works in the world; by being of service to others, and hospitable to widows, and orphans, and foreigners. Jesus modeled compassion and generosity throughout his ministry, especially with those who were sick, or hungry, or controlled by demons. He remained in deep relationship with God through prayer and worship, and encouraged his disciples to do likewise, especially in the not too distant future, when he would no longer be physically present with them. The disciples' ability to bear fruit would be dependent upon their continued reliance on God's grace and the gifts of the Holy Spirit. Bearing true fruit would be evident by who they were being more so than by what they were doing.

Being in a deeply trusting and loving relationship with God, the disciples would be sustained to love the world; even those parts of the world that commit sinful acts against God and their neighbor. Bearing the fruit of love for one another amidst evil and suffering would be challenging, but Jesus' abiding Spirit would empower the disciples to bear witness to his risen life of among them. For through Jesus' resurrection all are offered new possibilities for living in a world transformed

by compassion and mercy, and forgiveness and reconciliation. Through God's abiding love we are drawn back into lifegiving relationship with Jesus, the true vine. By acknowledging our interconnectedness with God and each other, all can celebrate our interdependence and participation in the flourishing of God's entire vineyard.

As optimistic as this may sound, we know from the early chapters of the Acts of the Apostles that life in community was tainted by human tendencies toward greed, dishonesty, and egotism. Each time someone tried to bend the rules of engagement away from the flourishing of the wider community, that person and those closest to them would languish. Each time someone tried to justify which neighbors were worthy of care and concern and which weren't, the vision of a loving and just society would further deteriorate. In our own context, we know all too well the consequences of extreme individualism. As Americans, we enjoy proving our independence of others, promoting our self-reliance, and celebrating our self-sufficiency. Competition is obsessively cultivated, and often more highly valued than cooperation.

But some of our competitive tendencies were themselves challenged this past year as the entire world face the devastating effects of the COVID pandemic. At first we thought we were immune to the illness and death happening on another continent. But as the virus spread rapidly we remembered how interconnected and interdependent God's creation is and always has been. Nevertheless, we wrestled to control the virus while struggling to maintain our independence, We soon were reawakened to the reality that our personal actions directly impact the health and wellbeing of our communities, our nation, and the world. Whenever we acknowledge

the interconnectedness of all life, we develop a greater capacity to love all of God's creatures, even those on the other side of the globe.

But holding to just the idea of connectedness can lure us into believing that we are engaged in meaningful relationships. The ease with which we communicate digitally has created an illusion of connectedness, but in reality the development of true relationships has suffered. Technology connects us with an avalanche of news, entertainment, and information. But although we are linked in through email and texting, to digital media and social networks, rates of depression, loneliness and social isolation are escalating. Even before the pandemic real relationships were suffering from lack of true connection; from lack of actual shared experiences. And just when we thought we couldn't be any more connected through technology, we realized that we had to find ways of remaining in relationship through technology.

Like other faith communities, we have remained connected throughout the pandemic via digital technologies such as Zoom, Facebook Live, and YouTube. We have been able to reconnect with people who have moved to other states and countries. And we have been able to witness in real time how this virus impacts real people, real families, and real communities. Our sense of relationship and relatedness has been transformed. And yet, as we look toward the promise of reconnecting in person with friends and family, we continue to be shocked by the continuing effects of the pandemic in other parts of the world. The crisis in India is overwhelming. The numbers of infections and deaths are incomprehensible. The images of disease and death are distressing for people around the globe. Technology has brought us intimately close to the realities of our neighbors.

Seeing and hearing about the incredible toll this pandemic is having on others is mind-boggling. Recently I have caught myself numbing my reactions to the

horror; anesthetizing my mind to the unfathomable realities of other human beings. We who are in less dire situations can immediately disconnect with the click of a remote control, with the swipe of our finger across our cell phone screen, or with our voice commanding our digital echo spots to escape to somewhere less painful. But for those trying to survive surrounded by suffering and death, there is no escape. For those who have relatives in that part of the world, that painful reality is much closer to home; that excruciating suffering is much closer to their hearts. And if we are honest with ourselves, the relatives of our friends and colleagues are our own relatives, for we are all related.

Although we can momentarily look away, we know that our consciences will be deadened, and our souls will be diminished the more we prolong our disconnection from other parts of the human community. These words of Martin Luther King continue to echo through digital and real conversations because we know they are true: “It really boils down to this: that all life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one destiny, affects all indirectly.”¹

Real relationships that are nurtured within loving communities are what God desires for all of us. Our mutual indwelling with God’s love and the abiding Spirit of the risen Christ helps us grow in true and deeper relationship with one another. As we come out of this pandemic, let us continue to nurture compassion and generosity. Let us pray for God’s guidance to strengthen our resilience in listening and caring, in nurturing and collaborating, that our world may be transformed to new life by the mutual indwelling and sharing of God’s love.

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¹ <https://speakola.com/ideas/martin-luther-king-jr-interconnected-world-massey-5-1967>