

5th Sunday of Easter “God Prunes So We Can Grow”

Fr. Frank Schuster

The Gospel reading this weekend is a bit unsettling. Jesus says that he is the vine and we are the branches. So far so good, that seems rather comforting. Jesus then suggests that God is like a gardener who prunes us so that we will bear more fruit. That doesn't sound very nice at all. Pruning is a violent action. Pruning involves taking a knife, a clipper or a saw to a plant, sometimes cutting it down without killing it, so that the plant can grow to greater splendor. This is an uncomfortable analogy because, well, pruning is painful. At a deep level, we know pruning is spiritually beneficial for us but we still dread it because pruning hurts.

I mention this in part because, as I announced last weekend, our parish is in the process of spiritual pruning, now that I am being transferred and as we prepare to welcome a new pastor. I think most of us know at a deep level that eventually a transition to a new pastor is important for the health of any parish, and this parish is getting a good one in Fr. Ramon. However, change isn't easy as we all know, for him, for me and for all of us. We dread change even if we simultaneously have some excitement in opening a new chapter. This describes me as I make the transition to Saint Vincent de Paul. Any family who has moved to a new city at some point knows what I am talking about. It is very stressful and emotionally exhausting. Jesus however gently reminds us he is the vine we are the branches. We have life being connected to the vine through our baptism. However, to remain on the vine, we should expect to get pruned from time to time. It helps us grow in discipleship.

We have a great example of this in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. We see Saint Paul proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem at great personal risk. This passage is the continuation of the story of Saul's conversion. Before he converted to Christianity remember, he was a great persecutor of Christians. The Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and asked him “Why do you persecute me?” Saul fell to the ground blind. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank. Finally, he was taken to a disciple of Jesus and he was healed. His story is an example of spiritual pruning. The Lord pruned this man so he could make the spiritual transformation from Saul into St. Paul. This pruning was necessary so he could stand up in public to proclaim the Gospel.

The same could be said for all of us. I run out of fingers counting the ways I was pruned early on in my life, moments of correction that I simply needed, without which I wouldn't have been able to stand before you right now as a priest. My friends, can you identify the pruning moments in your life and identify how God used these moments to help you grow into the person you are today? We can also ask ourselves, if we asked the Lord to take his pruning shears and to get busy with our souls this week, where should he start? What areas in our lives are simply incompatible with our vocational choices that simply need to be sheared off so our lives can fit better in the landscape we belong to?

Of course, when we are in the midst of the pruning, the fruits of our suffering are almost impossible for us to see sometimes. There is nothing fun about being pruned whether we are talking about us as individuals, together as a parish community, or even as a universal Church. On the other hand, when we look back from heaven, how grateful will we be for the skillful hands of the master Gardener! We should know by now that the Lord, in fact, knows what he is doing. The fruit of the God's handiwork is our salvation.