

## 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter “Spiritual Pruning”

Bishop 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. Then Jesus 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, does it? I mean, think about it, pruning is a violent action. Pruning, after all, involves taking a knife, a clipper, or a saw to a plant, sometimes cutting it down without killing it, so that the plant may grow to greater splendor. This is an uncomfortable analogy because, well, pruning sounds very painful. Who here wants to be pruned, raise your hand?

I think most people are uncomfortable with the idea of spiritual pruning. In fact, many versions of Christianity only want to present a comfortable image of Jesus, a feel good Jesus, a *sola fide* Jesus, an “only faith is sufficient Jesus”, a “no work is required of us Jesus”, a Jesus that does not expect anything from us. This is not the Jesus we get in the Gospel reading today. No. Jesus here is the vine we are the branches. Now, expect to get pruned. That's the message. Expect trials and tribulations. Expect hardships that will test our faith. And, I think we can intuitively understand why we have to deal with hard times. Hard times help us grow. It can be difficult to measure a person's character solely during the good times. It is during the challenging times that a person's character is more easily discernable.

And we have a great example of this in our first reading from the Acts of the Apostles. Here we have 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. This story is an example of spiritual pruning. The Lord pruned this man so he could make the spiritual transformation from Saul into St. Paul. In our first reading today, we see him proclaiming the Gospel of Jesus Christ in Jerusalem at great personal risk not too long after his conversion.

Now, gardeners tell me that there are four related reasons why we would prune a plant. First, appropriate pruning can promote plant health (say that five times fast☺). The benefit here of course is to get rid of dead or diseased branches so to promote the health of the entire plant. Secondly, pruning can help maintain a plant so that it will fit appropriately in the landscape of a garden. Thirdly, a gardener may prune a plant just to improve that plant's appearance. And finally, pruning can help protect the wellbeing of other plants or even people, if there is a safety or property concern.

I imagine that God can become motivated at times to prune our souls for similar reasons. God may prune us so to promote our overall spiritual health. God may also prune us so that the dead or diseased areas of our souls are removed, such as in the

Sacrament of Reconciliation. God may also prune us at times so that our spiritual appearance and belief systems fit better in the landscape of the Church. God may prune us just to improve our overall wellbeing. God may also prune us for the wellbeing of the other people around us.

My friends, most of us can remember a time when we were spiritually pruned. We might be calling to mind right now when those times were. If we take the time to spiritually reflect, we should be able to recognize the fruits of these pruning moments. For instance, if a young priest didn't experience the horrors of Nazism and Communism, one wonders if he would have grown into Pope John Paul II? If young sister hadn't come face to face with the horrors of poverty in the streets of Calcutta, would she have grown into Mother Teresa? This isn't to say God wills evil to exist in our lives. God is all good so I don't think God wills evil, but objectively speaking, God sure seems to allow it though. Why is that? I believe that, in the divine plan, God allows us to experience evil so that greater good may come of it in ways we might not readily see or understand. 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?

Take time this week to pray and to consider the ways how the quality of our character today is due in large part to the pruning experiences we went through, the lessons we learned, and the values we adopted as a result. We can also take the time to prayerfully consider: If we asked the Lord to take his pruning shears and to get busy with our souls this week, where would you like him to start? That is an interesting question to ask in our prayer life. What dead or dying branches in our soul need tending or clipping so to promote better overall spiritual health and appearance? 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 find ourselves in, such as our family or identity as a Christian? What areas in our lives need a little snipping here or there for the benefit of our overall wellbeing or the wellbeing of the people around us? 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. On the other hand, when we look back from heaven, how grateful will we be for the skillful hands of the master Gardener! After all, the fruit of the Lord's handiwork is our salvation.