

John 15: 1 – 8 Prudent Pruning or Reckless Reduction ?
Newtonbrook United Church – May 10, 2009



Jesus said;

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."¹

Just like last week – and next week – the Bible story comes to us in a metaphor that is agriculturally based. This week we will not go into the need to update the language. Anyone can refer to last week's sermon for more information on that.

This metaphor that Jesus used was not, of course, original. The prophets had used this image, describing the people of Israel as the vine and God as the One who cared for the vine. In Isaiah, for example, we read that:

*"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting;
he expected justice, but saw bloodshed;
righteousness, but heard a cry."*²

This week I am inviting all of us to think about our lives, both as individuals, and as a community of faith, and ask a question about what needs pruning in our life? A synonym for pruning might be:

- trimming
- cutting back
- reducing
- tightening up

The Bible commentary that I use tells me that the Greek word for "Prune" also means "cleanse". What in our lives needs to be cut back, or trimmed, or cleaned up, so that we can live more abundantly?

I grew up on a dairy farm so I do not know much about how to care for fruit trees, or grape vines. What I do know though is that those who had apple orchards in our area spent time every year trimming branches from their apple trees so that they would have a larger crop. Without trimming, as happened to the two apple trees on our farm, the fruit was smaller than it was in the

¹ John 15: 1,2(NRSV)

² Isaiah 5:7 (NRSV)

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orchards. That, I believe, is what Jesus is saying to us. We need to trim our lives regularly in order that our lives can be lived as abundantly as possible.

Last weekend I had the privilege of participating in a retreat at Five Oaks – one of our United Church retreat centres. The practice of retreat is not much honoured in a BUSY WORK these days, but it does honour the instruction of Jesus to:

“Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest awhile³.”
That is what Jesus did, and maybe we ought to consider doing that more frequently – pruning, or trimming, the busyness out of our lives.

The leaders of our Common Life retreat were Sue and Peter Short. You may recall that Peter is a past Moderator of the United Church.

During that retreat, one of the things that Peter said to us was that we will never get all of the things done that we think that we have to do:

- we’ll never answer every e-mail
- we’ll never get the house completely tidy
- we’ll never get all the phone calls made that we intend to make, etc.

HOWEVER,

Peter said that we, as people who are a part of the vine rooted in God, are called to be disciples. And, he said,

“The purpose of a disciple is to learn the craft of the Master.⁴”

We belong to God! This is the God who has shared many gifts with us so that we can minister in God’s world. Are we focused on learning the craft of Jesus – or one might say learning and doing the ministry of Jesus?

The God we belong to is a God of resurrection – a God of new beginnings! This Easter season is a time when we think about Jesus being in the world in A NEW WAY. For each of us, this is a time to imagine how our lives can be enriched – bear more fruit – by being transformed through a concentration on our purpose in life. For our congregation, Easter transformation can mean a concentration on mission.

Instead of doing whatever comes along, because that might be a good thing to do, and it may well need to be done to make this world a better place, are we consciously pruning our choices to “learning the craft of the Master?”

This is an important question for us as individuals because we are blessed to live in a part of God’s world where we have many choices. There are several opportunities for us to use our time and resources, both for ourselves and for

³ Mark 6:30

⁴ Peter Short, Five Oaks, May 4, 2009

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others. Still, not everyone here in this affluent city, or this affluent neighbourhood, is that fortunate, and we need to recognize that fact. Some people have few choices. There are those who are a bud on the vine – a bud that is attempting to grow.

Our church belongs to God!

What we know from looking outside the door of this building is that the world “out there” has changed since this building was constructed. A few years ago the United Church published a workbook to help congregations move with the times, and adjust to the fact that circumstances outside the church have changed. In that workbook on mission it was stated that:

“Ignoring that change deters us from following God in mission in Canada as it is today. There is a comfort zone of sorts inside our congregations, but it is a dangerous one. The danger is that inside our congregations – even our most “successful” ones – we may be tempted to keep on doing what we have always done, as long as we can afford it. The end result will be an approach to mission that resembles a palliative care centre. The mission will become focused on keeping the “patient” comfortable until the end comes.”⁵

That is what can happen when a congregation does not engage in an analysis of its programming and does not adjust to changing times.

As you know, for ten years I was engaged in Intentional Interim Ministry – attempting to help congregations live a fuller life and ministry. One of the phrases that I frequently heard was,

“But we’ve always done it that way!”

I usually didn’t endear myself to congregations when I suggested that some pruning was in order. I quoted Albert Einstein; who said that one definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and wondering why we don’t get different results.

Last year, during the Surfing with the Spirit process, Paul MacLean offered Newtonbrook an image:

Paul said that congregations can be like trains; their programs like boxcars. Congregations add new programs, but do not abandon any that they presently have. As a result, the train gets longer and longer. The energy needed to pull the train increases. No wonder it slows down.

⁵ Embracing Transformation: Congregational Mission in a Changing Canada, page 8

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In business a few years ago, during a time of several mergers and acquisitions, there was a phrase employed to caution business leaders NOT to branch out in a willy-nilly fashion, like a vine growing without being pruned. The phrase was, "Stick to the knitting." It meant that businesses were to emphasize their core competencies. Do what you know how to do in the best way you can. Stick to your mission in life!

As I said earlier, I grew up on a dairy farm. We had registered Holstein cattle. Our mission was to breed registered Holstein cattle for sale and we at Bakerholm Farms ended up selling breeding stock to Italy, Mexico, Cuba, and to other places. There were lots of opportunities for us to pursue other goals, but one of the lessons that I learned was that in order to be successful at what we were doing, we had to concentrate on the genetics of our herd, and doing what we did in the best way possible. For us, pruning unproductive cattle was called, culling the herd.

Sometimes it was painful to see a favourite cow – not a sacred cow – leave the farm. That's part of the process involved in attempting to be one of God's disciples – keeping the larger goal in mind. We belong to God and Love is the fruit of our ministry!

There were times when Dad kept some cows longer than they needed to be kept – they had become favourites. However, when their time to be culled from the herd finally arrived, Dad was usually nowhere to be found when the truck arrived. He found it very difficult to part with some of those cows, but he knew that it had to happen for the betterment of the herd.

I think that judicious pruning of activities is what needs to happen in many of our personal AND congregational vineyards.

There are many opportunities for mission in God's world. What is it that we do best here at Newtonbrook? What needs to be trimmed, or left for other vineyards to grow?

For example, we may grow apples, Northminster may grow pears, and Lansing may grow peaches. Do each of us need to grow all three?

This congregation belongs to God, we all belong to God. Can we have faith that God is involved in a mysterious way to shape each of us, and each of our congregations, so that we learn the craft of the Master? If we are a part of the vine that is rooted in God, **new Easter life** will come to this branch as we engage in God's mission to bring life to God's world – a life of abundance.

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Hymn # 581 – When we are Living

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Prayers for God's Family & Creation

Creator God, we are your people and you have indeed been good to us.
We live in a prosperous part of your creation.
You have surrounded us with your love.
You encourage us and support us as we try in our human, fallible ways to live
as disciples of Jesus.

We thank you God that, strengthened by our participation in the life of the true
vine, we are enabled to tell others about your abundant love. we tell others
about your love through our words and actions; through what we say, how we
say love, and through how we live in your world. We are not alone and we
thank you, loving God, for being with us at all times.

Spirit of truth and justice,
nourish us with your compassion,
and prune us with your truth
until we are one people,
dedicated to living in peace, with justice,
abiding always in you and growing in love.

Mothering God, we offer our thanks
for all those mothers who have nurtured us;
encouraged us, challenged us, disciplined us,
and who have even pruned some of our ways,
so that we can be the people who we are today.

Easter God, you are the vine-keeper,
you are the One who grafts us into yourself,
and calls us your own.
May we be your Easter people,
bearing the fruit of resurrection faith. Amen.