

I still have a lot to learn about gardening—what plants do well where... in what kind of soil / light, that kind of stuff; but I do know a little bit about the value of pruning – at least with regard to rose bushes (one of my mom’s favorites)...

A rose bush, left to itself, will soon start to grow in on itself... and become a tangled mess. It will still produce roses, but it will produce a bunch of not-so-good roses instead of a those really beautiful roses.

A rose bush, quite literally, gets in its own way. It *needs* the help of the gardener to grow in the right direction / to the right ends. And pruning is an essential part of the care regimen that is required to encourage healthy growth with beautiful blooms.

What does the pruning do?

- It removes the dead / diseased branches (canes) so that insects don’t take up residence in the dead branches and multiply.
- It encourages airflow through the bush by removing the branches that are crossing / rubbing against each other as well as those growing inward toward the center instead of outward toward the sun.
- And when you cut back the oldest branches, new growth will come... so pruning rejuvenates the plant and encourages blooming.

Well... as far as I understand it... the same is true of grape vines. Left on their own, vines will grow uncontrollably and end up in one big tangled mess. They *need* to be helped to focus their energy on producing good quality grapes... rather than a bunch of second-rate, sour grapes.

The lifeless, unproductive branches need to be removed / cut back to the live wood... and diseased or damaged branches need to be cut back to the healthy wood—to improve the vine’s over-all health... to encourage the vine to put its energy into new growth... to keep the vine vibrant / “young” / full of life.

Pruning helps to prevent the spread of disease. It helps to control and direct new growth, to increase the number and quality of the fruit, flowers, and foliage. Pruning is *necessary* to maintain the vine form... to help the branches grow outward, towards the light... rather than in on itself...

Notice: the vine grower is *needed* to keep the vines in order. Without the vine grower’s cutting and pruning... the vine will become a tangled mess.

Notice, too: at some point, *ALL* of the branches need to be cut back / pruned by the vine grower—the dead, unproductive / fruitless branches... as well as the productive / fruitful branches—for the overall health / fruitfulness of the vine.

-----

*“I am the true vine,”* Jesus says, *“and my Father is the vine grower.”*

*“I am the vine,”* Jesus says, *“you are the branches.”*

It is clear that this final “I AM” saying of Jesus is all about relationship! It is about the relationship we have with Jesus... and with God, the Father... and with one another—the intertwined relationships between the vine grower, the vine, and the branches (and the fruits of the vine, too).

Given that, how do we hear Jesus’ words about the cutting out / cutting back / pruning done by the vine grower? Are they meant to be words of threat / warning... or are they words of promise?

At first, his words sound harsh / threatening—especially when we hear about the branches on the vine *being removed... cut back / pruned... thrown away / thrown into the fire... burned...* BUT... when you think about it, what Jesus gives here is really just a metaphorical description of what actually happens when we do not stay connected to the true source of life → We end up cut off... useless... withered... dead – just like the branches we clean up from our yard and haul away or burn.

These are the consequences of separation from the life source. This is a description of the reality of disconnection—of what happens when we don't abide in Jesus... when we are separated from his love and acceptance... when we run away or hide or think we can do it on our own. But it is also a promise of the steadfastness and power of Jesus' presence (his abiding in us)... of the Father's loving care / tending to the vine...

The context of this passage is important. This is part of Jesus' "Farewell Discourse" in John's Gospel—in other words, ALL of this is being said on the evening of Maundy Thursday... on the eve of Jesus' crucifixion.

Jesus has gathered his disciples around him—to try to prepare them for what lies ahead.

He knows what's going to happen—to him... and to them. But they do not.

He knows that he is about to go... to leave them behind...

He knows the trials and struggles they will face in the days / weeks / months ahead...

So, he urges them to stay closely connected to him and to each other: "*Abide in me,*" he says, "*as I abide in you...*" He urges them not to try to go it alone, trusting in their own strength... because branches that choose to "go it alone" / try to live apart from the life of the vine... soon discover their mistake—they wither and die... and are good for nothing but the fire. But branches that remain in the vine (and who submit to the vine grower's pruning knife when necessary)—they live and bear fruit.

Jesus knows that his disciples are about to be cut down—by his arrest, crucifixion and death. But he wants to assure them that they will survive... and not just survive, but grow and thrive – that this cutting / pruning that will lead to abundant life... and fruitfulness.

"*Abide in me,*" Jesus says, "as I abide in you." This is the key! But what, exactly, does it mean to "*abide*"? The Greek root, *meno*, carries a wide range of meanings—"remain / stay in place; live / dwell; last / endure / continue / hold on"... Try replacing "abide" with any of these.

"*Remain in me / live in me / continue in me / hold on to me,*" Jesus urges us, "... as I remain in you / live in you / continue in you / hold on to you."

**These were important words** for Jesus' disciples to hear 2000 years ago.

**These are important words** for us to hear today—when so many of us are feeling cut down / pruned by the circumstances around us... by the realities of the pandemic... by the darkness / violence of the world around us... by the challenges of every day life... and so much more.

Whether you're a healthcare worker, emotionally, mentally, and physically stretched by the day-to-day demands of work, and the grief of too many deaths, and the seeming "uncaring" attitudes / behaviors of so many... or a parent struggling to make ends meet / to provide a healthy, nurturing environment for your

kids... or a youth who is being bullied because you're different / starting to believe what's being said about you... or a teacher stretched to the limit and beyond, trying to stay connected to your students (and their parents) / constantly adapting lesson plans... or any number of people who may feel cut down by life / by their present circumstances / challenges—TODAY... Jesus offers a word of hope and promise: *"I am with you... abiding in you / holding on to you... loving you... sustaining you—and I will not let you go!"*

*"Abide in me / remain in me / hold on to me,"* Jesus urges, *"...as I abide in you / remain in you / hold on to you."*

This is more than just good advice that Jesus gives us here. This is a promise... that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us... that no matter what happens, Jesus will hold on to us... that as long as we stay attached to the Jesus, the vine, he will nurture and sustain us... and God, the vine grower, will work for good and bring new and abundant life.

Dear friends, the cross reminds us of the great lengths to which God will go – for us.

**God chose** NOT to sit back / far away in heaven... detached from the pain and hard realities of our life in this world.

**God chose** to come, in Christ Jesus... to be joined to it / to us—to the joys and sorrows, the ups and downs, the hopes and disappointments, the difficulties and frailties of life in this world—so that we know God's unending for-all-time commitment to us.

The cross shows us just how much God's loves / care for us. It is God's promise to be with us always... through all things. And the resurrection is God's promise that no matter how much tragedy / pain / turmoil we endure, none of these hardships will have the last word.

You see... with this image of the vine and the branches (his last "I AM" saying), Jesus leaves his disciples (and us!) with a powerful picture of deep connection and relationship— "an image of absolute dependence, certain reliance, and a binding relationship that is severed only when we choose to walk away..." (Karoline Lewis, "On Withering" in *Craft of Preaching / Dear Working Preacher*, April 23, 2018).

Thank goodness for God, our loving vine grower... ...who wants us to be drawn more and more into the life-giving relationship of the Father and Son... who tends the vine and branches with care / cutting and pruning where necessary... so that we can bear quality fruit—and lots of it!...

But what, exactly, *is* the fruit that we are to bear? The simplest answer (in John's Gospel, anyway) is LOVE. The Christian life begins in love... and it is carried out / lived in love.

- Jesus' command to *"love one another as I have loved you"* is what keeps us from being an inward-turned / self-serving body of individuals.
- The greatest commandment, as Jesus put it, includes both love of God *and* love of neighbor—he insists that the two can NOT exist separately from each other.

Bearing the fruit of LOVE is not what makes us disciples.

Bearing the fruit of LOVE is what reveals that we are Jesus' disciples... healthy branches intimately attached to Jesus, the vine.

Bearing the fruit of LOVE is dependent on abiding in Jesus, the true vine. For, as he put it, *"apart from me, you can do nothing!"*

- ➔ In what ways are we connected to / disconnected from Jesus, the true vine?
- ➔ Are we fruitful or not?
- ➔ In what ways are we abiding in Christ?
- ➔ What fruit are we producing?
- ➔ What needs to happen for us to produce a bountiful harvest?