

**“Abundant Fruit”**  
**The Fifth Sunday of Easter**  
**The Rev. Patricia Gillespie - May 10, 2009**

*Acts 8:26-40*

*Psalm 22:24-30*

*1 John 4:7-21*

*John 15:1-8*

I have a real problem with gardening.  
I can't bear the pruning.  
I just hate cutting off something that is alive.

Actually I'm not good at getting rid of extra stuff in general:  
I've been going through old files and boxes this week,  
Trying to get rid of junk I don't need.  
The cleanup is a little easier, because most of the stuff has no life in it  
and isn't going to bear any fruit in my life.

The Greek word in today's gospel that we get translated as "pruning"  
is a combination of two words: cut and clean.  
So our translation loses the word play and the sense of the story.  
In the translation, one wonders why after mentioning the Father's pruning,  
Jesus says, "you have already been cleansed by the word"  
Listening in Greek, one hears: the Father cuts clean,  
but you have already been cleansed by the word.  
God the gardener is cleaning up our act.  
Removing the non-fruitful parts of one part of the organism  
for health and fruitfulness of the whole.

In spite of some preachers' fiery sermons,  
I don't think Jesus is talking about cutting unproductive people off from their life in Christ,  
or even from the church.  
That's weeding, and this is not weeding because this vine is all one organism.  
(Weeding is another story ... both in the garden and in the bible.)

Still, this cutting clean operation doesn't sound like fun.  
I'm not sure I like the sharp-edged Word of God slicing away at my life or my church.  
Though I do confess that there are some dead and dying parts I'm having trouble letting go of.  
And I suspect I'd be healthier and bear more fruit  
without the drain they are on my life.

I'm glad Jesus doesn't stop his story about the vine there - with the cutting and cleansing.

He reminds us that as long as we remain connected to him,  
he will bear much fruit in us.

By ourselves we can't grow anything – the fruit is from the vine through the branches.

Now this vine begins to sound like what we heard about love in the epistle.

Abide in Jesus and you will bear fruit.

Remain in God and the love flows through to others.

Abiding or remaining connected to the holy is what gives life.

Love is God flowing through Christ into us and out into the world.

That love is so full of power that a healthy vine produces abundant fruit.

The branch just lets the love flow through.

Ephrem the Syrian, one of the church's all-time great hymn writers

describes the branch of the church as so heavy with fruit

that it bends down even to hell

to feed the sinners with God's love.

(So I guess I can stop worrying so much about those fiery sermons that suggest

that the Father prunes away sinners from the Body of Christ.)

The fruit of God's love conquers all.

I find John's biblical 'love chapter' even more powerful than the better known one of Paul's in  
First Corinthians 13.

Paul describes what love looks like.

John writes about how love works.

Though both present images of organic unity,

Paul and John have differing underlying images of community and church:

Paul describes the interdependence of diverse individual gifts in the Body of Christ.

John's vine and branches image is more profoundly relational and centered -

all the branches of a vine look the same,

they twist around each other and support each other,

and they all depend on the same vine,

on, as the epistle describes it, God's love in Christ.

Without the vine, without love, we can do nothing.

God's love is at work in our lives.

It shows up all around us.

Nine-year-old Kevin came to live with us

after he ran away from home and got picked up by the police.

He was sullen and angry, skinny and bruised.

And he hoarded food.

His social worker said he'd been regularly punished by his parents  
not only by beatings but by withholding food from him.  
At our home he always held out his plate for seconds and thirds and got it.  
Most of it went into pockets and ended up hidden around the house or in his backpack.  
(Of course the dogs, whom he adored, found it immediately.)  
Reassuring him that healthy food was always available to him in our home  
didn't help at all.  
Neither did telling him that hidden food goes bad and would make him sick.  
So we began serving non-perishable meals and snacks,  
which disappeared rapidly . . . and the beagles got fatter.  
And one day Kevin came home from school and found a new shelf in his closet –  
one far too high for beagles.  
His hoard grew.  
Kevin became a little less sullen,  
and, though he still avoided the other kids,  
when he had a beagle by his side he sometimes even smiled.

Then the sheriff arrived with more foster kids - three siblings.  
The middle child, four-year-old Brian, clung tightly to his older sister Alicia.  
refusing to speak or to come in the house.  
As the sheriff reached to pick Brian up and force him inside,  
Kevin, who had been watching quietly, restraining the dogs, shouted, "Wait!"  
and ran to his room.  
He came back with a granola bar in his hand and Boomer the beagle at his side.  
He held out the granola bar to Brian and said to him,  
"Come inside and you can give Boomer a treat."

The branch is bearing fruit.  
When your life becomes full it can overflow.  
The love is spreading.  
And there is no end to God's abundant love.

We give because we have received.  
We love because God first loved us.  
The love spreads and grows,  
and returns and blesses.

*The boldness of our love is pleasing to you, O Lord, just as it pleased you that we should steal from your bounty.*" — Ephrem the Syrian, "Hymns on Faith" 16:5.

The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life,  
keep from me the spirit of indifference and discouragement,  
lust of power and idle chatter.

[kneel/prostration]

Instead, grant to me, Your servant,  
the spirit of wholeness of being, humble-mindedness, patience, and love.

[kneel/prostration]

O Lord and King, grant me the grace to be aware of my sins and not to judge my brother;  
for You are blessed now and ever and forever. Amen.

[kneel/prostration]

The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life,  
give me not the spirit of sloth, idle curiosity/meddling, lust for power and idle talk.  
But grant unto me, Thy servant, a spirit of chastity/integrity, humility, patience and love.  
Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see mine own faults and not to judge my brother.  
For blessed art Thou unto the ages of ages. Amen.

The Prayer of St. Ephrem the Syrian

O Lord and Master of my life,  
take from me the spirit of sloth, despondency,  
lust for power and idle talk.

(Prostration)

But grant unto me, Thy servant,  
a spirit of chastity, humility, patience and love.

(Prostration)

Yea, O Lord and King, grant me to see mine own faults and not to judge my brothers and sisters. For  
blessed art Thou unto ages of ages. Amen.

(Prostration)

O God, cleanse Thou me a sinner  
(12 times, with as many bows,  
and then again the whole prayer from the beginning throughout,  
and after that one great prostration)

clapping song: We love, because God first loved us.