

MOVING ON

Easter 5 Year B

Acts 8:26-40; Ps. 22:25-32; 1 Jn. 4:7-21; Jn. 15:1-8

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Growth is a natural part of life. If a person an animal or a plant isn't growing, it is very likely dying. But growth is not always easy. Sometimes it is painful as we learn (hopefully) from the mistakes we make along the way. For children growing up, there can be many painful times as they venture out socially and academically—learning the rules of life. These days, that is not an easy task, particularly when you consider the issues of peer pressure and bullying, that we hear about so often.

As Christians, growing in the knowledge of God can also sometimes be a painful experience. We don't always get it right. We don't always say the right things. We don't always love our brothers and sisters in Christ, let alone our enemies. And sometimes it's easier to love our enemies than it is to love our brothers and sisters in Christ.

Sometimes there are personality clashes. Sometimes people have different goals or ideals. Sometimes people have different theological perspectives. But even through all of this there is opportunity to grow in our understanding of God and how, as a response to God's love for us, we might serve God and one another.

In John chapter 15, Jesus likens us to a vine—a vine with branches grafted into it from all over the place—different varieties, with different strengths and weaknesses—but all grafted into the same vine, from which we gain our sustenance. That same vine is, of course, Jesus Christ.

As we grow in Christ—as our branches grow stronger—as we move out into different directions—sometimes we can forget whose vine our branches have been grafted into—we can easily lose sight of our goal or our focus. And every so often, God the vine keeper comes along to do some pruning—to cut out the dead wood—to re-align our focus—to get us moving in the right direction.

Now, I'm not that much of a gardener. I have trouble keeping the lawn mown. But I do know something about pruning. Not very much, I admit, but enough to know that a gardener does not prune the branches of a tree or a shrub in order to kill it—that's what we have Round-up for isn't it? And whipper snippers. A gardener prunes for one reason

and one reason only—to make the tree or shrub grow—to promote fresh new growth—to encourage it to grow how the gardener wants it to grow—so it will give the greatest yield—the nicest and juiciest fruit.

And it's not just a case of a little snip here and a little snip there. There is no such thing as a timid gardener when it comes to pruning. Very often the gardener's work is a ruthless concern for the eradication of the surplus wood so that the rest of the plant can bloom. It's not indiscriminate, but it can be severe.

Merrill Tenney, in his commentary on The gospel of John, gives his observation about the work of a vinedresser and the pruning process..

In pruning a vine, two principles are generally observed: first, all dead wood must be ruthlessly removed; and second, the live wood must be cut back drastically. Dead wood harbours insects and disease and may cause the vine to rot, to say nothing of being unproductive and unsightly. Live wood must be trimmed back in order to prevent such heavy growth that the life of the vine goes into the wood rather than into fruit. The vineyards in the early spring look like a collection of barren, bleeding stumps; but in the fall they are filled with luxuriant purple grapes. As the farmer wields the pruning knife on his vines, so God cuts dead wood out from among His saints, and often cuts back the living wood so far that His method seems cruel. Nevertheless, from those who have suffered the most there often comes the greatest fruitfulness.¹

And that's the way it is with God and us. None of us are free of problems. All of us contain elements of pride, greed, bitterness, resentment and fear. We shouldn't be surprised at this. The Scriptures tell us that it's a part of who we are. It's a part of our human nature to be sinful and rebellious. So, let's allow God to do his pruning—so that he might do amazing things in our lives and in our church so that we might be more equipped for Christ's ongoing mission in this place—so that we might bear much fruit.

Normally, a grapevine is a very productive plant. Each spreading branch is intended to produce lots of fruit. No vine grower is foolish enough to invest his time and effort in

¹ Merrill C. Tenney from *John: The Gospel of Belief*, Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 227-28.

cultivating vines merely for the foliage on its branches. He looks for results. He looks for fruit. As the branches of Christ in the Kingdom of God, we are expected to produce the fruits of spiritual life.

The apostle Paul once detailed in his writings what those fruits of the spirit were. He said, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control”. How’s that for a fruit basket? It’s a pretty good list for the cultivation of life’s orchard.

Undergoing God’s pruning to produce this kind of fruit may result in our lives being turned upside down. I know it will mean giving away things like bigotry, bitterness and resentment and all those other nasty habits that pervade our lives. It may mean changing our preconceptions about the church, about God and Jesus Christ—and about what it means to be a Christian and live a holy life—a life dedicated to God and the church.

Yes, it will be painful at times. People will get upset and angry. But when we allow God to prune our lives, we will know that God has touched us and reformed us. People will grow in the knowledge and love of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ. People will be filled with the Holy Spirit for service...and our churches will grow. We will see people who want to know more about the God we serve—and people who are hungry for healing and wholeness.

So often we can get so caught up in our own concerns—finances, resources, stress, fatigue etc.—both as individual Christians and as a church, that we end up treading water—putting all our efforts into just staying afloat—going nowhere fast or maybe just going around in circles.

Brothers and sisters in Christ, it’s time to stop treading water. Its time to move on—to start swimming—heads down, body streamlined (just as well I’m speaking metaphorically). It’s time to stop complaining and start confessing. It’s time to stop procrastinating and start proclaiming. It’s time to stop bellyaching and start believing. It’s time to move on...towards the upward call of God in Christ Jesus.

And the only way to move on is to be grafted into and stay grafted into the vine—to abide in it, as Paul says—to become connected to and centred on our only source of life, Jesus Christ—and through that connection, to become part of what God is doing in our midst. The fruitfulness of the branches depends on its connection to the vine—nothing else.

The word “Abide” is a great word and covers a broad nuance of meaning: It can mean to *remain in one place* rather than leaving or going away. It can mean to *continue against opposition*, so you do not waver or give in to opponents or flee from them. It can mean *staying the same when all other things are changing*. And it can also mean *the sense of mutually indwelling*—a union so strong, so intermeshed, that it is impossible to think of one without the other.

To abide in the vine then, means to stay in the same place and not wander about—to stay fast and stick to the game plan, no matter what—to be so immersed in *his* life as he is in *yours*, so that when people know *you* they will know *Christ* and God to whom he points.

Vine branches, that gain their nourishment from the same source do not jostle for places of honour—they don’t attempt to tear each other apart—they work together, guided and led by the gardener, for the common good—they work together to produce good fruit—giving all the glory to God in Christ, who is the source of our strength—the author and perfecter of our faith, as the writer to the Hebrews states. To abide in the vine means to live in God’s love—to experience it for ourselves and to be able to share it with others.

I urge you, let God do his pruning in your life—so that we might grow together as healthy branches, bearing much fruit, connected to the one true vine, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour. Let us, as brothers and sisters in Christ, move on in faith and in Christian service as we seek be a part of what God is already doing in this place.

To him be all glory, honour and praise. Amen.