

Living the Fruitful Life: 2. Necessity of Pruning

John 15:1-6

November 10, 2019

Pastor Tami Luckhardt

Everything I know about growing plants, I learned from watching my father tend his rose garden while growing up in San Diego. Planted along the driveway to our house, Dad's rose garden was this carpet of color that welcomed everyone who came to visit. Dad spent hours selecting just the right new varieties to plant in his garden. Then he nourished them with just the right fertilizers, weeding and watering. He was always so proud to show off his newest buds or a beautiful bloom. So perhaps you can imagine my shock and horror when I arrived home from college one winter break to find everything chopped off at ground level. I wondered if dad had gone crazy with the pruning shears or perhaps taken a wrong turn with the lawn mower. I thought Dad has ruined his rose garden but my dad knew something that I did not. He knew the power and the importance of pruning. That is what we are going to talk about today in week 2 of our message series we are calling Living the Fruitful Life where we are using the metaphor of a vineyard to understand the Christian journey. Today we will examine the concept of pruning and how to apply the concept to our lives as people who want to follow Christ.

But before we get to that, let's look at what the lifecycle of a Christian looks by looking at the lifecycle of a vine. It begins by planting baby vines in good soil. We can see this when a child is baptized or a teen or adult gives their life to Christ. We saw that today in the baptism of baby Ellie. Then, when the vines will have to grow for a few years before they will bear any fruit. And during that time they need to be tended to, pruned, fed, and watered. We see this stage in our 3rd graders who are going to receive their Bibles this coming Saturday at the Bible Banquet. They have been planted and growing for some time now, they are establishing their roots, but they are not yet producing grapes. Their Bibles will help them to grow deeper in their faith so that they are able to continue to mature and eventually produce fruit. God's goal in all of this is to produce spiritually mature people. Our goal at Messiah Church is to provide an opportunity and community where people can become deeply committed Christians who are spiritually mature and who are producing good fruit. This is what we were made to do!

In John 15, our scripture for today, it is the night before his crucifixion. Jesus and his disciples have just finished the Last Supper. Jesus knows that this is his last night but the disciples have not figured that out yet. So Jesus has a very urgent and important message to convey to them. He tells them, "I am the vine and you are the branches." We usually think of the whole plant when we think of a grape vine but Jesus is differentiating between the vine and the branches with a very specific goal.

A vine, planted in good soil grows a deep root system. Jesus is saying he the trunk and the cordons (or the arms) that stretch out on either side of the trunk. And it is through this system that the nutrients will be delivered to the branches where the fruit is born. Jesus is saying that he is the vine and will deliver the nutrients to us, the branches. We were made to bear fruit.

When Steve, Joy Ann and I visited Sovereign Estates Winery in Waconia, Minnesota, we learned that pruning is the most important activity that takes place in the vineyard. The vinedresser looks for branches that are not bearing fruit as well as for dead space that can be filled in with something more productive. There is only a certain amount of space and so he wants to use that space to maximize the fruit. If branches are allowed to continue to grow where there only leaves and no grape clusters, the nutrients are diverted to growing leaves instead of grapes. So in pruning, those leafy branches are cut off, thrown into a pile and then burned. This

is exactly what Jesus says in this parable. He is asking the question, are you being fruitful? If you are not, then you are not being what you were created to be.

Now, there are definitely seasons in each of our lives where we are not producing fruit but instead putting down roots and preparing to grow. These seasons are necessary and helpful. Take for example the weekend that Jerry and I spent on the north shore in early October. This wasn't a time to bear fruit. Mostly we were resting and relaxing, hiking and visiting historic sites and scenic locations. We were being refreshed and renewed so that we could be more fruitful and effective when we returned to our family and our jobs. And there is nothing wrong with that. In fact, I think Jesus wants us to take time to relax and rejuvenate. Jesus attended the parties and feasts that were part of community life in Galilee, and he was not the quiet guest in the corner! He was in the midst of it all; so much so that Jesus' critics thought he was having way too much fun. Jesus knew the value in letting a field (or a vine) lay fallow for a period of rest and renewal.

"Every branch that bears fruit, God prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." Hang on a minute. I can understand cutting away branches that are not producing fruit but cutting away the productive branches? That seems counterintuitive. Why would you cut away branches that are growing and bearing fruit? Pruning begins in the winter so to bring balance to the vine and new shoots in the spring. Balance is important to the lifespan of the vine. Sometimes, less can become more. In other words, to produce more, sometimes you have to cut back to less. So what does apply to us? If we allow our vines, or our lives, to grow, unmanaged and out of control, we'll get a whole lot of branches... growing a whole lot of leaves but producing very little fruit.

When I ask people how they are doing, one of the most common responses is "I'm busy." Anyone here feel like that's your go-to response? I'm busy. So many of us live these Type-A lives in a rat-race world of go-getters and overachievers. We feed into the idea that more is more but if we understand the concept of pruning, we can understand that actually... less can be more. Less allows us to do more effectively and the fruit that we produce will be better fruit. We think that the more we do, the more value our lives have.

We instill this in our kids too. We don't want them to miss one single opportunity in life so we enroll them in hockey, soccer, baseball, dance, music lessons, scouts, karate, swimming, volleyball, gymnastics, Messiah kids, and on and on. We have taken our sense that "more is more" and put it on our children. It begins immediately after school and continues until the sun goes down. Then we return home to start homework and baths.

But being busy is not the same as being fruitful. So let me ask you this, are you busy being busy or are you producing good fruit? What does the fruit look like in your life? What hurtful or unproductive habits can you prune out of your life to make space for good fruit? Who are the people that you've touched with kindness, compassion and mercy? Who are the people that you are pouring into so to produce fruit in the years to come?

The things that help us stay connected to Jesus, to remain in Jesus and grow deeper in our faith and spiritual life are our spiritual disciplines.

Prayer: Praying everyday can deepen our relationship with God. Yet surveys tell us that only 55% of us say that they pray every day. When asked why the rest of us don't pray, do you know what they say? I'm too busy!

Scripture: We know that reading scripture deepens our faith and spiritual life. Every day the Grow, Pray, Study (GPS) is emailed to 250 of you. It goes directly to your home computer or your smartphone. Yet, only about 95 of us open that email each day. When asked why we don't take 5 minutes to read the GPS do you know what people say? I'm too busy.

Worship. Participating in worship strengthens our spiritual life. We are invited into this sanctuary-whether physically or online-to dwell in the presence of the Lord and soak up the power of the Holy Spirit. Jesus said that when 2 or more are gathered in my name, something special happens. Yet regular worship attendance means worshipping just 2 out of 4 Sundays. When asked why people don't worship more regularly they say, I'm too busy.

Getting together with other Christians to study God's word and encourage one another is our journey deepens our spiritual life. At Messiah Church we have over 200 people who participate in a regular faith group or covenant group. This is about 25% participation rate. When asked why people say, I'm too busy.

Serving God by serving others through missions is an even smaller percentage than that.

So what can we do to change this? Perhaps for you it means less time of Facebook or Instagram or binge watching TV or gaming or gossiping or working too much. If we break it down by the numbers, I think we can find a starting place to change our behavior that does not seem so overwhelming or intimidating. It's similar to starting a healthy eating plan or an exercise schedule. The hardest part is sometimes just getting started.

Prayer: There are 1440 minutes in a day. Can you prune back something in your life to create 5 minutes of space for prayer? Maybe set your alarm clock 5 minutes earlier.

Worship: Worship at Messiah Church, in person or online, takes about an hour a week. There are 168 hours in a week. Is it possible to prune back an hour of sleep or play or work to find time to worship once a week? With our On Demand streaming option, you can literally worship wherever and whenever it works best for you!

Daily scripture reading: Each day contains 440 minutes. Reading the GPS takes about 5 minutes. Is there something else in your life that you can prune back to allow 5 minutes to read scripture? If you don't receive the GPS now and you'd like to, you can use your Welcome Card to request it be sent to you or pick up a paper copy from the wall across from the library-near the front door.

Faith Group and Serving: Most faith groups meet for an hour a week and serve together at least once a month. There are 168 hours in a week. What can you prune back to allow time to be with other Christians and serve others together?

Next Sunday is Commitment Sunday here at Messiah Church. This is the Sunday that members of Messiah Church will make a financial pledge for the year 2020. I wish I could stand here tell you that Jerry and I have been generous givers from the beginning but that is not the case. That is not our story. As a young couple with a young family, it often felt like the little bit of money that we would give to the church would not be impactful to the church's budget and we were discouraged and maybe even a bit embarrassed. So for awhile, we gave very little to nothing. What it took us awhile to figure out is that it didn't matter to God *how much* we gave but simply that *we gave something*. Then each year we have tried to increase in our generosity. The act of giving was about us growing in our discipline to honor God and grow in

our faith. So we started with something small but then each year, we've made it a priority to increase our giving. And as we've increased our giving, and this may sound counterintuitive, but the more we give, the easier it has become to be generous givers.

I want to tell you about a member of Messiah Church who is spiritually mature and a generous giver. I'll call her Mary. I spoke with Mary this week and asked her why it is important to her to connect her faith and her giving. Mary said she has known God her entire life but hadn't attended church since she was a very young child. When her husband of 25 years died, Mary found herself alone, struggling and trying to establish what her new normal would be. Eventually, she sold their family home, downsized and moved here to Plymouth. She also knew that putting down roots in a church where she could grow her faith and love of God was going to be an important part for her new normal. One day as she was driving by Messiah Church, she remembered that her mother had taken her to Methodist Church as young child and it sparked a warm memory. So she came the next Sunday and found the people here to be warm and genuine. "They didn't look through or around me. They saw me." A few weeks later, Mary attended the new member class and made the decision to be "all in." So she joined the next Sunday. That was 10 years ago.

Since then, Mary attends worship every week. She is a member of a faith group and serves with them each week. And she is a generous giver. She follows the Biblical model of tithing-giving the first 10% of her income to the church. That included the profits she made when she sold her family home, what she received from her husband's IRA. That pattern of giving has continued to this day. When I asked her what giving means to her, she said, "I am so thankful for all that I have been given in life. Everything that I have is not mine it is simply on loan from God. I am just trying to figure out how best to give it back to God."

Grow, Pray, Study for the Week of November 10, 2019

Weekly Prayer: God of love, plant me in the soil of your grace. Nurture me with the strength of Christ, the vine of everlasting life. Enlighten me with the wisdom of your Spirit, which flows through me today and all days. Abide in me, that I may abide in you and live in your love. In your holy name, I pray. Amen.

Monday, November 11

Scripture: John 15:1-5

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Observation: Israelites often saw themselves as part of a vineyard God tended (Psalm 80:8-18, Isaiah 5:1-7). A golden sculpture of a vine over the porch of the Jerusalem Temple reinforced the image. But when Jesus used that image he made it more personal and more challenging. Only as his followers stayed united to him like branches to a vine, Jesus said, would their lives bear the kind of fruit God sought.

Application: Jesus was definite: "A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine." In our high-achieving, Type A culture, do you ever find yourself tugged in the direction of

thinking you can produce fruit by yourself, that your good intentions and determination are all you need to lead a life pleasing to God? We'll see this week that Jesus did call us to work with him. But given that, why do you believe he said you cannot do it by yourself?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you are the vine; I am a branch. Keep me so closely connected to you that I will be a branch that bears good fruit. Amen.

Tuesday, November 12

Scripture: Isaiah 18:4-6; Jeremiah 5:1, 10-11

This is what the LORD says to me: "I will remain quiet and will look on from my dwelling place, like shimmering heat in the sunshine, like a cloud of dew in the heat of harvest." For, before the harvest, when the blossom is gone and the flower becomes a ripening grape, he will cut off the shoots with pruning knives, and cut down and take away the spreading branches. They will all be left to the mountain birds of prey and to the wild animals; the birds will feed on them all summer, the wild animals all winter.

"Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find but one person who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city.

Go through her vineyards and ravage them, but do not destroy them completely. Strip off her branches, for these people do not belong to the LORD. The people of Israel and the people of Judah have been utterly unfaithful to me," declares the LORD.

Observation: Some vineyard pruning is relatively random. Excess leaves and tendrils are cut away to encourage greater yield. In our lives, illnesses or accidents may produce a similar kind of "pruning." God doesn't cause those things, but we may learn lessons as we trust God through them. The prophets, however, spoke of very intentional spiritual pruning, in which God called for pruning away branches that "aren't the Lord's."

Application: Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and others (Amos 2:6-8) challenged Israelites to stop acting in ways that betrayed their covenant with God and hurt the weakest of their neighbors. They spoke about pruning branches that aren't the Lord's. When have you seen someone close to you (maybe even yourself) needing to set aside some attitude or behavior that was clearly not what God wanted in their life?

Prayer: Lord God, when you find an unfruitful branch growing in my life, warn me and give me the courage to honestly face the problem, and trust your pruning action. Amen.

Wednesday, November 13

Scripture: Matthew 5:29-30; Colossians 3:5-10

If your right eye causes you to stumble, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. And if your right hand causes you to stumble, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature: sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry. Because of these, the wrath of God is coming. You used to walk in these ways, in the life you once lived. But now you must also rid yourselves

of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie to each other, since you have taken off your old self with its practices and have put on the new self, which is being renewed in knowledge in the image of its Creator.

Observation: Jesus clearly taught in his Sermon on the Mount that our mind and heart stray off course before any outward act ever does. “I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment” (Matthew 5:22). “I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The apostle Paul said the pruning it takes to choose a new life in Christ is like taking off and putting on outfits. He listed hurtful traits Christ-followers should “take off” (verses 5, 8).

Application: The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, “From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8). How many parts of your listening, watching or reading fully live up to that standard? How could adopting Paul’s wisdom help you prune damaging influences out of your life?

Prayer: King Jesus, let your word show me where my life is bearing bad fruit, or is on the way to doing that. Help me to grow in the healthy, fruitful directions that you offer me. Amen.

Thursday, November 14

Scripture: Galatians 6:7-9

Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Observation: Last week we read Jesus’ parable that showed the value of being good soil in which the seed God plants can grow strong and fruitful (Mark 4:2-9, 14-20). In today’s reading, the apostle Paul switched the image a bit. He pictured us as the farmers, who need to be careful what we plant in the soil of our lives. His point was that often our choices, rather than things we cannot help, are the source of disappointing life outcomes.

Application: In the first part of Galatians 6, Paul talked about relationships, about ways the Galatian Christians could help and uplift one another. Those are choices we control. When have you seen your choices, or those of someone close to you, “sow” one or more negative effects? What have you learned, or can you learn, to bring about better outcomes in the future?

Prayer: Lord God, each day I face dozens of choices. Give me ever clearer vision so that I make those choices in ways that will make me, and even more importantly you, pleased with the harvest they produce. Amen.

Friday, November 15

Scripture: James 3:8-18

But no human being can tame the tongue. It is a restless evil, full of deadly poison. With the tongue we praise our Lord and Father, and with it we curse human beings, who have been made in God’s likeness. Out of the same mouth come praise and cursing. My brothers and sisters, this should not be. Can both fresh water and salt water flow from the same spring? My

brothers and sisters, can a fig tree bear olives, or a grapevine bear figs? Neither can a salt spring produce fresh water.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let them show it by their good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice. But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace reap a harvest of righteousness.

Observation: We’re virtually certain that Jesus’ brother James (Matthew 13:55, 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19) wrote this letter. Many of its phrases echoed Jesus’ teachings. Today’s reading reminds us that discerning the quality of the fruit the “grapevine” of our lives produces is not deeply mysterious or difficult. James laid out clear examples of what both bad and good fruit looks like.

Application: James 3:13-15 said “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” are bad fruit; humility good and wise fruit. Have you ever seen jealousy or selfish ambition damage relationships between people? How does humility protect against these hurtful ways of thinking? Do you believe you can act with confidence (in any setting) out of humility rather than pride? What attitudes or actions does it take to make that a reality?

Prayer: God of wisdom, I want to increasingly live out your wisdom in my earthly life. Guide me as I prune and shape my character to more closely match your ideal for me. Amen.

Saturday, November 16

Scripture: Matthew 7:12, 15-20

So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the Law and the Prophets.

Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn bushes, or figs from thistles? Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them.

Observation: Jesus didn’t offer quick, easy surface change. He focused on the deep inner roots from which life springs. Like prophets before him, he warned about false prophets (Jeremiah 6:13-14; Ezekiel 22:28). They challenged Jesus’ followers, too (Acts 20:29). But Jesus’ main concern was not for us to play “gotcha” toward others, even false prophets. Jesus wanted us to know how to recognize them because following them can damage the roots of our life, and the kind of fruit we bear.

Application: Jesus said we learn about a tree’s inner makeup from the fruit it bears—grape vines bear grapes; apple trees bear apples. In the end, the key spiritual reality is not how good we look publicly, but whether our way of life springs from our connection with God or not. We often apply these verses mainly to religious leaders who fail morally—but the principle works the other way too. Are there people you have learned to trust more as you have seen the fruit of their life and work? What kind of “fruit” do you find most persuasive? How closely does your

inner life align with the public “face” you show at church? What makes inward reality more valuable than outward show in God’s sight?

Prayer: Lord Jesus, I’m willing to make every effort to become the person you call me to be—or at least I want to be willing to do that. Please add your power to my effort. Amen.