**Carefully Pruned and Bearing Fruit**

Psalm 22:25-31
John 15:1-8

 Most people between the ages of 6 – 12 will have no problem identifying what is special about the Canadian Cherry tree in our back yard. It has a large branch about 3 feet off the ground. It is close enough so you can pull yourself up and from there navigate to higher branches where you can make your parents nervous enough to say, “get down from there”. It is a great climbing tree. Our children climbed it when they were young. The tree had appeal not only to my son and his neighborhood buddies, but also to some neighborhood boys with whom my son and his friends did not get along and rather disliked. These other boys had minimal supervision, tended to swear a lot, were prone to fights and were often suspect in some of the neighborhood problems. We let those boys climb our tree and it seemed to make a difference, not only in how they felt about us, but also how they responded to my son and his buddies.

 Now that spring has arrived, our Canadian Cherry has begun presenting us with unfolding delights that we look forward to every year. In all honesty, the tree is a bit of a show off, but we don’t mind. If you were to swing by our house today, what you would see is a profusion of white flowers, blanketing the tree. If you are walking or your car window is open, you will be greeted by a sweet smelling aroma. In the early spring, the leaves are green, but shortly after the flowers disappear the leaves begin turning to a dark purple. Sometime in July, a small berry ripens that has great appeal for birds and squirrels. One summer we sat and watched as about 30 robins gorged on those berries. The berries must have been a bit fermented, because some of those Robins were moving about on the ground like drunken sailors, propping themselves up with their wings to keep from toppling over. Besides the berries the tree is a great place for a hanging bird bath and a wind chime.

During the summer months our Canadian Cherry shades our backyard table, with a canopy that let’s through just enough light.

 There is only one problem with our tree, which if ignored, can become a serious issue. The tree is prone to a fungal disease called “black knot”. It is a rather unsightly growth that completely encircles and girdles a branch. Dog owners who own homes know that one of the less pleasant spring time tasks they must face is go into their yard and clean up the business left by their dogs during the winter. The fungal disease infecting Canadian Cherries looks like someone has taken that spring clean up and tossed it into the tree where it lodged on the branches, creating the appearance of tree full of dried up dog poop. In addition to being rather unattractive, the fungus, if left untreated, will eventually kill the tree. The best remedy is to remove the fungus as soon as you see it by pruning the branch that has become infected. I watch that tree like a hawk. I found one of those growths just this week and with tree clippers in hand pruned back the branch with the unsightly fungus.

 There are no gift barring Canadian Cherries in Palestine, but there are grape vines a plenty, all with the potential, like our Canadian Cherry, of offering the blessings of their fruit. In our Gospel today Jesus draws upon a grape vine as a metaphor for our relationship with God, with one another and creation itself. Our text from the Gospel of John begins with these rather startling words, “*[Jesus said:] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.* “

 Two things immediately stand out in this metaphor of nature that Jesus employs. First, Jesus is boldly and unequivocally asserting that we have the potential of bearing fruit. Like our Canadian Cherry we have gifts to offer that will be a blessing for the world. Jesus, of course, expects these gifts are utilized for making available the love and justice of God, “God’s Realm, God’s Kingdom” for which we pray.

 The second thing that stands out, and which many of us find uncomfortable at best, is that pruning is involved. *He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.* “ Pruning sounds so negative, like getting a bad grade on your report card or naming areas that need improvement on a job performance review. We want to be positive, affirming. No one wants to dwell on problems or faults or heaven forbid; something called sin. As most of you know we have been interviewing for a new Director of Music Ministry. Here’s one of the questions we came up with, “Do you see planning as a strength or as a growth area?” Isn’t that a nice way to put that question? There is no pruning involved, no need to name areas that might be problems, just growth. Who wants to talk about pruning?

 Apparently Jesus does because he knows what is at stake. For our Canadian Cherry, failure to prune could mean the life of the tree. According to Jesus, when it comes to life giving relationships, and baring fruit for the Realm of God, the same applies to us. Pruning is essentially saying no and sometimes that is exactly what we need to do.

This past week the New York Times ran an editorial reminding its readers that the ones who suffer most by our failed immigration policies are children. The editorial calls upon us to say no to language and policies that speaks of and treat these immigrant children and their parents as if they are less than human, referring to them and treating them as illegals. Pruning is needed.

More than likely you saw video of the Baltimore mom who went out in the street this past week, corralled her 16 year old son, with the authority of a mom who knew how to say no and mean it. Her son was at risk of getting caught up in the Baltimore violence as young men in particular engaged in stand offs with the police. This mom was doing a little pruning.

 Other African American leaders in Baltimore were doing pruning of a different sort. They pointed out with clarity that the violence in Baltimore began long before police cars were burned, stores looted or rocks thrown. Violence is present in the ways too many police officers treat young men of color. Violence is present in underfunded schools and lack of opportunity that leaves community unemployment rates reaching 50 percent. The list goes on, but these African American leaders are pointing out that a strong willed mom was far from the only one who needed to do some pruning.

 Pruning means saying no to behaviors, policies and practices that inhibit the love and justice of God being made known in our lives and in our world. If we are at times tempted to gossip, pruning is in order. If we are unwilling to listen, always insisting on our own way, pruning is in order. If we are inclined to judge without compassion, not recognizing our own weaknesses; pruning is in order. If we are quick to anger and slow to forgive, pruning is in order. If we engage in addictive behaviors, pruning is in order. If our financial decisions fail to take into consideration anything but our own desires, pruning is in order. The reason we include a prayer of confession in our service is that it is a reminder and an invitation for us as a community of faith to let God do a little pruning so that we might bear fruit and be the people God calls us to be.

 Fortunately pruning is only a part of the story that enables us to live into our potential, bearing fruit that truly reflects the love and justice of God. According to Jesus our capacity to bear fruit, our ability to live into the potential we have as individuals and as a community of faith is directly related to our relationship with one another and with God. “Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing”.

 One of the great temptations we face, especially those of us who have grown up with the hyper individualism of Western culture, is the notion that bearing fruit, living into our potential is a singular enterprise. To be sure we individually do our best, we individually give of our time and talent, but what sustains us, what gives us the strength and energy is living in relationship with one another and with God. This is why we come to worship on Sunday mornings. It has nothing to do with being good people or doing good work. There are many good people who stay home or in the coffee shops or wherever they are on Sundays.

We gather as a community of faith because we are sustained and strengthened by abiding with God who puts us in relationship with one another and with all creation. Together we abide with God and we enter into relationship with our West Side neighbors celebrating Cinco de Mayo. Together we abide with God and we enter into relationship with refugees from Siberia, Liberia, Iraq and the suffering of Nepal. Together we abide with God and we enter into relationship with children in St. Paul Schools and seniors in rural nursing homes. Together we abide with God and we enter into relationship with the water we drink, the food we eat, the air we breathe, the soil upon which we depend. Together we abide with God and we enter into relationship with immigrants, no matter when or how they come to Minnesota.

I am grateful for the Canadian Cherry tree in our back yard. I am thankful that it offers us beautiful and fragrant spring flowers, a place for children to play and sometimes overcome differences, a home and source of sustenance for birds, even those who over indulge in berries, a place of shade and comfort from the warm summer sun. To be sure it needs pruning if it is to live into its potential and share its many gifts. But, no one imagines the gifts of the tree; the fruit of its life stand alone or apart, or they are somehow separate from one another as if the fragrant flower has nothing to do with the happy child climbing in its branches. The gifts of the tree, the fruit of its existence, live and thrive in relationship, as do we when we abide in God and in God’s love.

**Psalm 22:25-31**

*In our first lesson the Psalmist offers praise to God proclaiming that to truly know God is to be in relationship with people of all nations and all creation. This relationship even includes future generations. Because of this relationship special attention is given to the poor and all those who are most easily excluded.*

From you comes my praise  in the great congregation;  my vows I will pay before those who fear God. The poor shall eat and be satisfied;  those who seek God shall praise God.  May your hearts live forever! All the ends of the earth  shall remember and turn to God;  and all the families of the nations  shall worship before God For dominion belongs to God,   and God rules over the nations. To God, indeed, shall all who sleep  in the earth bow down;  before God shall bow all  who go down to the dust,  and I shall live for God. Posterity will serve God;  future generations will be told about God, and proclaim God's deliverance  to a people yet unborn,  saying that God has done it.

**John 15:1-8**

*Our second lesson comes from the Gospel of John, the oldest of the four Gospels, written some 60 – 70 years after Jesus execution. The energy of the early Christian movement has subsided and now these Christians are wondering if they still have anything to offer. John recalls Jesus frequent use of nature for teaching about the Realm of God and proclaims the “Good News” with these words.*

[Jesus said:] "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."