

Msgr. Dennis Sheehan
Homily Given on May 10, 2009
Fifth Sunday of Easter
Liturgical Year B

I've heard this line time and again. So, most likely, have you. "I don't go much for churches. But I believe in 'the man upstairs'. Just he and I. After all, Father, that's what religion is all about."

I'm generally polite, so I don't bang the table and shout "No!" In truth, that "me and the man upstairs" is not what Jesus teaches. Nor is it the faith of the Catholic Church. We don't teach some vague "man upstairs" with very little connection to us. We profess faith in a very personal God, a God who is so crazy about us that he came among us as Jesus Christ. We believe the man upstairs (so to speak) came downstairs.

I don't say it, but I very much believe it. Jesus is telling his first disciples and us today about our relationship to him. He uses the image of a vine. It's an image removed from most of our experience. Let me try to put it on another level.

When I was a small kid, my parents planted a grapevine in our back yard. It had to be the most stubborn, stingy, and fruitless grapevine in our entire town. It grew leaves and tendrils; it leapt up the trellis, but not a grape to be had.

My mother lamented this lousy vine once to a neighbor. "Do you prune it?" she inquired. My mother was mystified. "Am I supposed to?" "Sure," said the neighbor. "The vine is getting in its own way. It's shutting out sun and air from the parts that want to bear grapes. Try it. Give it a good trim!"

My mother and I trimmed and pruned and – sure enough – got grapes the next season.

God is like that, says Jesus. He doesn't just put you here and watch you grow yourself into an obese couch potato. God is tending you and sometimes pruning. Think of that the next time you run into obstacles, suffer losses, face disappointments. The vine that's not pruned will suffocate itself in its own wild growth.

That's enough. Just let it be said that the man upstairs is really here downstairs and very much taken with tending and pruning his vine. If you sense more light and greater warmth in your faith, chances are you've been pruned. If it's dark and lonely for you, take courage. Pruning is always painful, but it leads us to growth and health. A blessed Mother's Day to one and all.