

5th Sunday of Easter (B-2021)
St. Patrick – Milford

There is so much about this Gospel of the Easter season that's hopeful and, dare I say, "fruitful" for us as Catholic Christians. Jesus reminds us: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower." Then he goes on to talk about pruning the vine and the vine bearing fruit. He is the vine and we are the branches!

I think we can all embrace Jesus' vine metaphor ... until he gets to the line: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

What's Jesus talking about? Last Sunday, Jesus says he's the good and gentle Shepherd who cares for each lamb in the flock. This week, he prunes withered branches and throws them into the fire. There's no comfort at all in hearing about being gathered ... then thrown and burned into a fire. The truth is, throughout salvation history, this verse, in particular, has been used to justify great violence and mayhem in the name of the Risen Christ.

A casual search of many of Bible commentaries will all agree that this verse means that if you backslide from what Jesus intends for you to do in this life ... or become religious renegades in this life... you will be (to quote one commentary) cast into the "everlasting burnings of hell fire by angels at the last day...."

So how does this fit with our understanding of God? God says: "I am the Good Shepherd" ... "I forgive you!" This is the lens through which God's love is channeled. How does killing heretics have any connection to the Good News of Jesus Christ? How does burning in hell make sense in light of the Gospel?

I think that we need to look more closely at what Jesus is trying to do in this parable. Jesus makes these comments to his disciples just before he begins his final hours toward the cross. He tells his disciples that he is the TRUE vine. The vine-grower is his Father. We, along with his disciples, belong on the vine for we are the branches.

Jesus says that the Father will prune the branches that don't bear fruit. Now, that could be taken as a threat. We could hear it as: "If you don't produce the outcomes I am looking for, you've had it!" But this is the problem with metaphorical language.

In a culture like the one in which Jesus lived, they understood vineyards and pruning and such. But here's the thing: that metaphor can just as well be understood to mean removing the parts of the branch—the parts of us—that keep us from bearing fruit.

A clue to this understanding is that word "prune." It's actually the exact same Greek word for "cleansed" that's used in the next verse, when Jesus says, "You have been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." "Cleansed"... "Pruned"... the same word. This does not mean, "thrown away or discarded." We have not been "removed" by the word of God. In fact, what the word of the Lord does for us is it brings us healing. It brings us reconciliation. It brings us together as the body of Christ.

But what about that burning stuff? Just before that part, Jesus says: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” It's through this “abiding” in Christ that we “bear fruit.” And the branches that do not abide in Christ, do not bear fruit, and are gathered and burned.

What needs to be pruned—to be cleansed, and burned away--are practices that take away from this fruit-bearing life. The more I am sincerely living as a part of this Body of Christ, the more I am seriously cleansed of pride and jealousy. I am cleansed of hopelessness and despair. I am cleansed of arrogance and hatred. How can I hold on to anger when I am regularly hearing about forgiveness among my fellow “branches”? How can I remain self-centered and focused solely on my own problems when, as a part of my regular practice, I am supposed to love others? These things get “pruned” away as I continue to abide in God’s love—in the community.

So, what does “abiding” look like? What does “bearing fruit” look like? Part of the answers we find in today’s reading from the 1st Letter of John. We bear fruit when we love one another. Why? Because “love is from God.” John tells us that “everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”

Living together in a community of believers is how we abide in Christ. The *fruit* of that abiding then ripens and becomes something good and sweet ... love. In your family life and here in the parish, we are continually working to abide in the vine, producing the good fruit of love and compassion. At the Easter Vigil and on many of our Easter weekends, we are bringing into our Church new members. We ... with our newly baptized ... abide in the vine. And every time **WE GATHER FOR WORSHIP**, we abide in the vine.