Fifth Sunday of Easter, Cycle B

Old St. Pat’s, 2024

It is no surprise to anyone

 that growing up in Gary Indiana

 did not provide many opportunities for visiting vineyards.

As the whole city was located over a prehistoric lake

So our post-war neighborhood was built on sand:

welcome to the Indiana Dunes.

While deprived of vineyards as a kid,

in overseas studies I saw many of them

and even briefly worked in one.

I had finished a grueling German course,

and decided to take a break.

A posting at my *Goethe Institut*

requested help with a wine harvest.

I thought it would be exciting;

 wrong: it was backbreaking.

The harvest had started at the end of October

 but the cool summer delayed the maturing of grapes

 so much harvesting was still needed in November.

 I imagined myself cutting grapes

 And after mentioning that to the foreman

 had my first experience of being called *Dummkopf*!

 harvesting is an art not to be entrusted to foreign students

 so I had the enormous privilege of lugging a large shoulder basket

 along the steep hills of the vineyard

 where the professional cutters could deposit their grapes:

 to date the hardest manual labor I’ve ever done.

 One lesson gleaned from that experience

 is that harvesting is an artform

 mixing mystery with muscle, nature with nuance.

 A second is that even *Dummkopfs* are welcome in the vineyard

 if they are willing to do the work.

A few weeks ago I ran across a blog whose commentary

on today’s readings was entitled [Subversive horticulture](https://thevcs.org/subversive-horticulture).

That is a particularly accurate caricature

of the divine horticulturalist in today’s gospel

who promotes pruning as an essential discipline for discipleship.

Jesus had a soft spot for *Dummkopfs*

like Simon Peter who could instantaneously transform

from Rocky to blockhead,

 with the most spectacular fall from grace of any of the chosen.

But Jesus’ openness to *Dummkopfs* being grafted

 on his lifegiving vine

 requires a willingness to submit to the art of pruning

 as happened to Peter at the very end of John’s gospel.

I did not hang around the Riesling vineyard

to observe the pruning done in early spring

but my *Dummkopf* corrector turned mentor explained

the importance of pruning for the health of a vineyard.

Unpruned grapevines produce too many leaves

 that diminishes the quantity of grapes as well as their quality.

 Pruning reduces the number of grape clusters

 allowing the remaining ones to be strong and full.

That wisdom might help us understand today’s 1st reading.

 It is not a typical portrayal of Paul.

 Usually this apostolic firebrand is giving instruction

 or on a conversion crusade

 or calling out someone for doing something

unbecoming of disciples.

 Today, however, neophyte Saul is the one under scrutiny

 viewed with deep suspicion.

 Just a few verses earlier

 he had been knocked off his proverbial high horse

 by the Risen one and literally blinded by his question

 “why do you persecute me?”

 In today’s post-pruning moment, we hear how Barnabas

 takes this fledgling disciple under his wing

 to assist in the long process of being grafted onto the Christ vine.

Peter and Paul were, of course, not the only ones pruned by God,

and ultimately nowhere near the most important one:

that was Jesus.

Though we are currently deep into Easter territory

today’s gospel teleports us back to Jesus’ farewell discourse

 a few hours before his arrest, trial, passion and death

* + - * Inconceivable self-pruning
			* being shorn of life itself
			* testimony to Jesus’ complete rootedness in his Father
			* and invitation for us to do the same.

This past week I came across an article on the [public good](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0749597820303952)

 in which OSP is literally mentioned 100 times.

 OSP in this scientific study, however, does not refer

 to Old St. Pat’s but Open Science Practices.

Nonetheless, the title of the article piqued my interest:

“Practice what you preach: Credibility-enhancing displays

 and the growth of open science”

 Open science is an ethical view of scientific research

 promoting free dissemination of such research across the globe.

 The authors contend that OSP would strengthen scientific integrity

 increasingly under suspicion

 because of concerns about the reliability of published results

 and prominent cases of data fraud.

 Yes fake news has a parallel in fake science.

 One of the solutions for countering fake science

 signaled in the title “Practice what you Preach”

 is a theory called CREDs or “culturally enhancing displays.”

 The articles explained CREDs with this example:

imagine that I present you with a mushroom I found;

 would you be more likely to eat it if I told you it was edible

 or if you saw me eat one like it?

 The latter strategy is more convincing

 because of the potential costs I could incur in each case;

 telling you that a poisonous mushroom is edible is costless –

 except for any retaliation on your part, however,

 my eating a poisonous mushroom would be much more costly.

 Because of this difference in the potential cost,

 you are more likely to be confident in assessing my belief

 when I communicate my belief via actions rather than words.

 Thus my display en­hances your judgment

 of the credibility of my beliefs ...

Jesus didn’t know much about cultural theories

 data fraud

 or the reliability of scientific publishing

 but he was a Master at credibility-enhancing displays.

 He preached the blessedness of the poor in spirit

 And embodied that and every other beatitude.

 He taught that the inbreaking of God’s reign

 was open to everyone willing to repent

 and in turn was the very incarnation of hospitality.

 He instructed that following him required disengagement

 from earthly possessions and family ties

 epitomized in God’s son who had nowhere to lay his head.

 An in today’s Easter word in the shadow of the resurrection

 the Only-Begotten reminds us

 that there is no grafting without cutting

 no harvest without pruning

 no abundance without sacrifice,

 climaxing in the pruning at Golgotha that sealed his earthly life.

Jesus was the personification of credibility enhancing displays

 and we are not only challenged to engage in such displays

 but to live these CREDs deeply rooted in our CREED:

 must be rooted in our baptismal vocation.

 In his letter to the Romans, Paul reminds us that

to be baptized means being initiated into Christ’s death

a reading strategically positioned in the Easter Vigil

before the elect enter the pool of transformation.

It is a poignant reminder

of the baptismal pledge that sustains us

through all of our personal and collective pruning

 in our aging

 health threats

 disintegrating relationships

 financial challenges

 and all that faithful doubting that disrupts our believing.

 As challenging as it sounds, we are called to distinctive faithfulness,

to practicing CREDs ground in our CREED

especially in the many ways our lives are diminished and disrupted

 snipped and sheared

 thinned and threatened.

My great friend Connie was a Lutheran Pastor and pioneering feminist.

 She was diagnosed with advanced breast cancer when she was 59.

 Before the radical surgery that she chose

 Connie came to the seminar we were co-teaching

 where the class wanted to anoint her.

 I asked if she wanted to say anything

 And in typical style she read a children’s story.

 But first unwrapped the scarf around her head

 Revealing a complete loss of hair

 from recent rounds of chemotherapy

 then she read:

*There once was a woman who woke up one morning,*

*looked in the mirror,*

*and noticed she had only three hairs on her head.*

*"Well," she said, "I think I'll braid my hair today?"*

*So she did and she had a wonderful day.*

*The next day she woke up,*

*looked in the mirror*

*and saw that she had only two hairs on her head.*

*"H-M-M," she said,*

*"I think I'll part my hair down the middle today?"*

*So she did and she had a grand day.*

*The next day she woke up,*

*looked in the mirror and noticed that she had only one hair left.*

*"Well," she said, "today I'm going to wear my hair in a ponytail."*

*So she did and she had a fun, fun day.*

*The next day she woke up,*

*looked in the mirror and noticed*

 *that there wasn't a single hair on her head.*

*"YEA!" she exclaimed,*

*"I don't have to fix my hair today!"*

Connie died 4 months later.

Before her death at the last graduation she would attend

in the seminary chapel where she taught

she asked the community to perform

the commendation of the dying for her.

And at the end of that ceremony,

 As the graduating divinity students marched out

 she stood in the baptismal pool at the entrance of the chapel

 and splashed each of them with the waters of new life.

While it may not be our preferred mode

 pruning, diminishment, aging, even dying

 offers believers our most unusual opportunity

 for credibility enhancing displays

 displays into which we were commissioned

 when we were splashed with baptismal water

 and baptized into the death of the Lord.

As Connie’s often said.

Facing death calls us to be kinder than necessary,

for everyone you meet is fighting some kind of battle.

She went on, Live simply,

Love generously,Care deeply,

Speak kindly and leave the rest to God

Life isn't about waiting for the storm to pass...

It's about learning to dance in the rain!

 For thunder clouds and the rain itself are holy reminders

 that entering the pruning pool

and there being marked with the sign of the cross

 is essential if we are to rise to eternal life.

This is our faith, and we are proud to profess it,

through Christ our Lord.