Fifth Sunday of Easter, 2021

Old St. Pat’s

With all of the references to the natural world

That so frequently punctuate the readings,

Especially the gospels,

I often wonder if it would have been more beneficial

To have studied the natural sciences

Or biology

Or animal husbandry

Or agriculture, rather than

all of the philosophy courses I was mandated to take.

Jesus is continuously talking about the natural world around him

About foxes and sparrows

Mustard trees and lilies

Fig trees and yeast.

And when he is not sermonizing on these natural phenomenon

He is knee deep in loaves and fishes

Sheep and pigs

Grainfields and seashores.

Today’s gospel reminds me how little I know

About horticulture, viniculture and oenology

Oh, don’t get me wrong,

I do know how to operate a corkscrew

can distinguish a Malbec from a Shiraz

And even am somewhat skilled at decanting a good wine.

But consumption is decidedly not the key to this familiar gospel image

Of vine and branches,

Or especially about the process of pruning for bearing fruit

So central to this celebrated pericope.

Thus, the past week I’ve been reading a lot about pruning

And why it is essential for all sorts of plants

But especially for grape vines

Surprising to me, some of the folk leading the way here

Are not vintners

Nor agriculturalists

But scientists who specialize in molecular genetics

And computer modeling[[1]](#endnote-1)

Recently, for example, two collaborating scientists

Explained that each shoot tips on a plant

Can influence the growth of all others

Active shoot tips release a specific hormone into the main stem

But if there is too much of that hormone already in the stem

They weaker shoots can’t get into the game

The system is clogged;

it’s like a crowded main road

blocking other vehicles from entering

From side streets and on-ramps

So those shoot tips get crowded out, and whither.

Shoot tips actually compete with each other

With the strongest branches growing the most vigorously;

But thoughtful pruning levels the playing field

Slows the traffic of the stronger branches

And lets all of the inhibited shoot tips back into the game.

This is an exceedingly important process for grape vines.

Unpruned vines grow in wild, unruly ways

They explode with new branches and cascades of leaves

That leave few resources needed for the fruit to grow

Parallel to this pruning process with grape vines

Is the need to train the vines

This means shaping them to grow along

Along vertical posts or wires

And then out onto horizontal wires or trellises

So they have more access to sunlight

But also are easier to prune

So to produce more fruit

Until my little excursion into pruning this past week

I think I overlooked an important aspect of today’s gospel.

When I have listened to this passage before,

I presumed it was about me being connected to Jesus:

He was the vine, I was a branch

And my spiritual task was to stay connected to him.

Pruning, of course, was part of the spiritual discipline

To prune myself of attitudes and practices

Of afflictions and addictions

That would prevent me from staying securely grafted

Onto the vine of Christ.

What was missing from that vision, however,

Was that the pruning and the grafting

The discipline and the commitment

The sacrifice and the growing

Are not only for my personal spiritual benefit

But for the sake of the vineyard

For the sake of the trellis of disciples

For the sake of the harvest of justice and reconciliation

That is the authentic fruit of being planted in Christ.

That insight pushed me back into the gospels

to ponder all of those stories

In which Christ was pruning his disciples for mission.

Remember the sons of Zebedee

Whose mother tries to secure high positions for them

In Jesus’ kingdom (Matt 20:20)

And in reply Jesus offers a pruning test

Inquiring whether they can drink of the cup of suffering

The cup he struggles with in Gethsemane

Before himself being splayed on the sacred trellis of the cross.

Jesus follows up this pruning test with an instruction

About not lording it over each other

But about becoming servants to one another.

Peter gets publicly pruned a number of times

Pointedly when Jesus calls him “Satan”

After the prince of apostles rebukes Jesus

For predicting his own death (Matt 16:23)

And then, more gently

At the very end of John’s Gospel

When Jesus recalls Peter’s triple denial

By thrice asking him “do you love me”

And reinforcing Peter’s mission to feed othes.

A more cynical approach could suggest

That in such instances

Peter got his wings clipped

But bird with clipped wings can no longer fly

And Peter with the other disciples needed to soar

In proclaiming the good news after the death of the lord.

So I prefer to imagine Peter getting pruned

Pared down

Cut back

Snipped and shaped and trimmed

So that the gospel, and not just Peter, would bare much fruit

I imagine that is also what happened to St. Paul

who got knocked off his high horse

but not decimated in his encounter with the Risen One

The Lord needed Paul for the sake of so many communities

The Corinthians, the Ephesians, the Galatians

So the Holy Spirit did some serious pruning

So that Christianity itself could be birth and bear fruit.

You and I have probably had parallel experiences

Of being cut back, sheared, diminished, and abridged.

Some of those moments, even from decades ago, stay with us:

The rebuke from a teacher or coach

not getting the scholarship or making the team

There are scores of these stories on the internet

That continue to simmer in so many souls

Sometimes the pruning is destructive, even abusive

I remember a section from Dr. Damon Tweedy’s

*Black man in a White Coat[[2]](#endnote-2)*

The reflections of an African American Doctor

And his journey through medical school, residency, and practice

From a working-class family with only a public education

Tweedy was accepted

into the prestigious medical school at Duke University

He tells the story of being in a large lecture class

And during a break in the lecture

While students were milling about ...

The professor, who seldom if ever spoke to students,

Made a b-line for Tweedy and asked

“are you here to fix the lights?”

When Tweedy didn’t understand the inquiry

The professor pointed to one section of the lecture hall

Where the lights were noticeably low

And so he asked again, so you going to fix the lights

When Tweedy said “no”

The Professor then asked

“then what are you doing in my class”

“I’m a student in your class,” Tweedy responded

This prompted the irritated professor to turn without a word

And return to the front of the room

slamming the door on the dignity of a promising student

Judged worthy of only being part of a maintenance staff

Because of the color of his skin.

That, in my estimation, was not pruning but professorial abuse

And the litmus test for distinguish between the two

Comes to us from today’s second reading, that is,

Whether the pruning is motivated by love.

While scars from past diminishments inflicted by others abound

Maybe part of the hidden spirituality of today’s gospel

Touches our own self-diminishment.

Some of us are growing older

Some of us are becoming sicker

Some of us are moving past our intellectual

Or physical prime

As our employability abates

Our abilities to play the game with the same vigor recedes

And our leadership skills start to atrophy .

We become aware that nature itself is pruning us

And we have little apparent control over such declines.

On the other hand, we do have control

Over how we respond to this natural ebbing of mind & body

Over whether or not we allow ourselves to be pared back

In a spirit of generosity, so that our families

Our friends, our community can bear new fruit,

Or whether we hold on tightly

Forcing others to compete for the energy

The light

The love we crave to absorb.

I have two great friends, long married

Who pondered diminishment as they wrote about

The spirituality of marriage.

In a veiled autobiographical way

They chart the stages of marriage over many decades.

The last stage is what they call “devotion”

They write:

In time, the shape of aging love earns the name of devotion. Devotion is the enfleshed affection that survives illness and aging and enjoys growing old together. The ancient author Plutarch (d. 120 AD) wrote: “the love for a virtuous woman suffers no autumn but flourishes even with grey hair” …[[3]](#endnote-3) By this point child-rearing is long gone, active careers are over, the couple’s love becomes an affection nuanced by the awareness of final days, of threatening illness. Such devotion might be called *eros* with wrinkles.

Nature prunes us all, at one stage or another

The example of Jesus, radically pruned on Golgotha

Invites us into the unlikely spiritual practice of diminishment:

The devotion of stepping aside so that others might flourish

trimmed back so that others might have more sunlight

Receding to the margins so that others

Might more easily claim the center

And so, with the poet we muse

There are moments when the veil seems  
almost to lift, and we understand what  
the earth is meant to mean to us — the  
trees in their docility, the hills in  
their patience, the flowers and the  
vines in their wild, sweet vitality.  
Then the Word is within us, and the  
Book is put away.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Today we pray that the veil might lift a bit

And Jesus Word might truly be in us

Eternally connecting us to the vine

In all of it sweet vitality,

Whose gospel prunes us only for generosity

helping others bear fruit in a rich kingdom harvest

Through Christ our Lord.

1. https://learningenglish.voanews.com/a/a-23-2009-10-12-voa2-83142337/130043.html [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Damon Tweedy, *Black Man in a White Coat* (New York: Picador, 2015). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. James and Evelyn Whitehead, “­­**Promises to Keep: A Spirituality of Christian Marriage,” in** *Catholic Marriage: A Pastoral-Liturgical Handbook,* ed. Edward Foley (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2019), p. 9. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Mary Oliver, “The Veil,” https://muse.jhu.edu/article/214662 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)