

Getting Pruned

B Easter 5--John 15:1-8

I once heard a radio story about a woman whose boyfriend had dumped her and just left her reeling. And she managed to get the eighties pop star, Phil Collins, to give her some advice on how to write a good break-up song¹. Secretly she hoped that her ex-boyfriend would somehow hear the song and come back to her. Well, that didn't happen. But the song she wrote actually turned out pretty well, and Collins pointed this out. The break-up had borne fruit for her. She'd gotten something tangible that she could play out of it. "But," she said, "don't you sometimes wonder, like, if it's better to have the song in the end or the relationship?" There was a long silence, and then Collins said, "Oh no, it's really better to have the relationship." They both laughed. "Yeah," she said, "that's the problem." And then he said, "But you don't have the choice."

Isn't that one of the great conundrums of life? We don't have the choice. Tragedy visits us on its own time and in its own way, and the only thing we have any influence over is how we respond. I think this is very much what Jesus is talking about in today's gospel reading when he contrasts branches that don't bear fruit with ones that do. Now, if you're anything like me, you may have read or listened to this passage and thought, "Okay, I get it. God is the vinegrower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches on the vine. Every branch that bears no fruit is removed and burned while the others get to stay and enjoy a fruitful life. Our job is, clearly, to be one of *those* branches, to make the cut, so to speak." But if we have interpreted the passage this way, we have missed something

important. We have missed the phrase "he prunes." First Jesus says, "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit," which, from the branch's point of view, sounds clearly unpleasant and to be avoided. So far so good. But then he says, "Every branch that bears fruit *he prunes* to make it bear more fruit." Now, doesn't that sound a bit ominous too?

Really, think of this from the branch's point of view. This is not just about lolling around in the sun and the breeze, growing a slow, fat bunch of grapes while sucking all our nourishment from the vine. This is about getting pruned. It's about the slice of shears taking parts of ourselves from us and letting them fall dead to the ground. It's about green stubs, gashed and weeping where leaves used to sprout. The relationship lost because the boyfriend dumped you, the athletic career cut-off by an injury, the gracefully aging marriage marred by an infidelity, the retirement plans withered to nothing by economic losses: this is about letting go of things because life forces us to. No one chooses to undergo this process. Getting pruned hurts.

And yet for some, the wounds are destructive only, whereas for others they give rise to new fruit, even maybe more fruit than if they had never been inflicted. I'm reminded of a professional chaplain I met when I was doing pastoral training at a hospital. I'll call her Barb. Her specialty was the neo-natal unit and the birthing center, and she was just this gentle, down-to-earth, midwestern grandma-type. "Oh, I love the babies," she'd say. "I just love the little ones." And she told some incredibly moving stories about baptizing little three-pound human beings who might not make it another twenty-four hours. Sometimes, she would even baptize babies who were going to be stillborn. "The baby is already in water in your womb," she'd tell the mother. And she'd put a hand on her belly and say to that little being, "I baptize you in the name of the

Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. She'd fill out a baptism certificate and give it to the parents along with a quilt like those ones our quilters group makes. "Mementos," she explained to me, "to honor that these little people were alive. That can be very important for the parents." How did she know? Because she had lost several babies herself this way. In fact, despite many attempts, she had never been able to bring a child of her own to term.

It would be easy to grow bitter or numb in this circumstance. It would be easy to become one of those aunties, you know, Auntie Barb, who takes a little too much bourbon in the evenings and has sharp words for the children. It would be easy to wither and let biological fruitlessness become a general pattern to live out in other areas of life. But instead, Barb took that great, great pain in her life and used the understanding it gave her to shepherd young parents through similar ordeals. She allowed that awful experience of limitation and loss, that excruciating process of being pruned, to bring forth new fruit. Is it more fruit or better fruit than if she had been able to have her own children? I wouldn't presume to judge. All I know is that by now there must be hundreds of couples who have been comforted by her presence during a time of immense anxiety and grief. All I know is that she loves those babies, and her life is full and blessed in a way that it would never be if she had become mean Auntie Barb who yells at the kids. All I know is that she is a person of prayer and great faith who somehow found a way to follow the advice Jesus offers us as life begins to clip away at our leaves. "Abide in me," he says, using a Greek verb that means "remain," "stand fast," even "endure." "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...[but] those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

ⁱ Episode #339, "Break-up," on *This American Life*, broadcast 8/27/07, accessed online at http://www.thisamericanlife.org/Radio_Episode.aspx?sched=1203