

2020: The Global Year of the Bible
The First Sunday of Lent: John 15:1-8
A Lamp and a Light, Part 9
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On Tuesday Laurie and I had an extended time of devotions as we thought and prayed together about the season of Lent. My question to her was “what are you hoping for personally during Lent this year?” Her response was about fruitfulness. She wanted to bear more fruit in ministry to the children & youth. In other words, her goal was other-focused for fruitfulness, which is what we want in our church staff, right? However, I challenged her to make a Lenten goal that was first and foremost about her own relationship with the Lord. I’m not saying that wanting to bear more fruit isn’t a good / great goal, but what I know is that we can easily become so focused on others that we forget that true fruitfulness has to start with our own relationship with the Lord. At the ECO conference we heard this personal challenge: “The best thing we can bring to our leadership is our own transforming self.” It is so true. The best thing any of us can bring to the conversation is what God is doing in us – which means we have to be allowing him to do something in us.

So, Laurie and I turned to John 15:1-8 to look for the right way forward. Let’s take a look and a listen: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ³He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”*

What did we hear? Remain. Remain. We personally, individually, must remain connected to Jesus. Remain. Abide. Remain with him. That’s a great goal for Lent. Remain with Jesus, grow ever stronger and deeper in your relationship with him, and the natural result will be: Flourishing Fruit Bearing! We also read with greater attention in that passage that God will cut off any branches that bear NO fruit, and he will prune those branches that have the potential to bear more.

So, Laurie and I prayed this kind of submitting prayer for ourselves – “As we remain in you, as we receive life from you, go ahead, LORD. Cut off, prune.” “Cut off anything in our lives that is bearing NO fruit for you, Father; and prune anything in our lives that needs to be pruned in order to bear more fruit.” And then I prayed it for the church. “Help us to abide, to remain in You, LORD. Cut off or prune programs, ministries, or practices, LORD, that are not bearing eternal fruit for your kingdom.” As we were praying I felt a rooted confidence in my soul that this was a prayer straight from the Holy Spirit for us.

We’ve been reading the Old Testament, and in these early books of our faith history, we see that God is active, right? God shows his power with signs – the burning bush, the parted sea, taking out stronger armies on behalf of the Israelites, the fire pillar at night, the moving cloud during the day, bringing forth water from a rock, raining down food from heaven every morning, earthquakes swallowing up whole families because of disobedience – etc. Would you agree God has been very noticeable, very present, very active in what we have been reading so far in this 2020 year of the Bible? So, here’s a question. Is God doing these sorts of things today? Is God still at work today? Is God still giving us signs of his presence for direction and confirmation of direction? I’m here this morning to tell you that he is. He is. I knew it before last Tuesday, but I know it even more since Tuesday.

About an hour after Laurie and I prayed together, about an hour after I prayed asking God to cut off and prune, we heard a thump in the building. We weren’t sure where it was coming

from. In fact, I thought it sounded like a bird hitting one of our glass windows in the vestibule so we both moved in that direction. I was still looking out the windows in the doors when Laurie said, "I think it was this." There on my office floor was the framed print of an old country church lying face down in front of my desk. I bought it at a close-out sale one day at a store in Chambersburg. I just liked the picture and the feelings it evoked in me of peace and beauty. This print has been leaning against the indent in the front of my desk since the week I moved in. For 17 ½ years this print has been in the same place. I don't remember ever touching it in those 17 ½ years - until Tuesday when it fell forward on its face.

My first words to Laurie, I think, were, "Wow. That's been there a long time. Why would it fall over now after 17 ½ years?" We glanced around the office to see if we could gather any clues and saw nothing but the regular chaos of my office. I immediately had a thought that I shared with Laurie about what had happened.

We had just prayed that God would cut off or prune anything in the ministries, programs, and practices here that wasn't bearing any fruit – and I thought, "Could God be saying that one of the things we need to cut off is the picture we all have in our minds of the 'perfect country church?' Could God have sent us a sign of something that was a stronghold in some of our minds of which we were not aware? What is the perfect church to you? What picture comes to mind? A congregation where everyone knows everyone, we sing songs everyone already knows, the building is clean and neat throughout the week, and where most of the people look pretty much like we look. A congregation where there are babies but they aren't too noisy, where there are people with special needs, but they don't require too much of us. A congregation where the minister always wears her black pants and the communion bread is always delicious, and the spot we like to sit in is always available to us? What is included in your picture of the perfect church? Is it biblical this picture that you have enthroned? Is it a fruit-bearing picture? Is it bringing people to Jesus, daily, so souls are being saved? Is God calling us, as we remain in him, to accept and in fact embrace the picture of a **perfectly imperfect church** where everything is not always wrapped up the way we want them to be – because people, leading people to Jesus is more important than any program, any ministry, and any practice we have grown attached to? What do we need to get rid of in our minds in order to embrace this truth: **The only thing perfect about any church is the perfect Savior Jesus Christ.**

About an hour later on Tuesday morning after the picture fell over, Laurie and I heard another crash. A smaller one this time. Laurie was ahead of me and ran right into my office. On the floor this time was a picture of me and John standing in the Jordan River in Israel in 1999. I was marking John with the sign of the cross using Jordan water as a reminder of his baptism in this same river where Jesus himself was baptized.

What now, Lord? Why this picture after the other picture, and why not any of the many other pictures I have on my office shelf? And here's what I think God wants us to cut off. I think God is calling us to cut off the old, unbiblical way of thinking about church leadership as always having to be clergy-centered and clergy-led, a way of thinking that the pastor pretty much does everything, knows everything, visits everyone, and attends every event. This change in thinking and in practice is something we've had our eyes on for a while. We are much more intentional lately in the development of new leaders. In fact, after making a comprehensive list several weeks ago – I discovered that 63 different people are serving on boards, committees, and leading small groups (not including staff). This is great – but it still isn't embracing the fullness of the biblical picture.

The Body of Christ is meant to have **every disciple** that is part of the body involved in helping the Body function and flourish in fruitfulness. That is definitely not happening. Many of us are merely 'audience' members who have not submitted to God's call to serve. Something Needs to Change.

The other part of the message in that particular picture being on the floor is this: If you are one of the people walking around with this thought in your head, "I hope Meagan never retires, because I don't know what will happen to our church when Meagan & John aren't here." Please

allow the Divine Gardener to cut that off right now, friends. Cut that thought off – take that thought captive to Jesus Christ who alone is the head of the church. This congregation will flourish with or without me as long as you are all doing your part and following Jesus. Repent of that line of thinking right now in Jesus' name.

On Thursday, the Rev. Crystal Lyde, pastor of the Port Royal & Mexico Presbyterian Churches called me. Today she is back in the pulpit after being out since November. She was given weeks to live at Christmas. But God saw the picture differently. She is a living miracle. She is a mighty woman of God. After catching up for a bit, I told her what happened here on Tuesday with the pictures. I wish I would have recorded her response. But here's a summary, and it came out of this Spirit-filled woman without hesitation: We have such a tendency to try to see everything in the natural. God does something and we block out the supernatural. We CUT off the spiritual because we are so used to, we are so comfortable walking in the natural – those things that we can see, hear, and understand. But God is supernatural. Beyond the natural. You better pay attention, she said. "I am," I said. "I am."

You may be sitting there and thinking, "This is pretty 'out there.' God doesn't knock over pictures to make a point." And I say, "Why not?" What wouldn't God knock over pictures to make a point? It got our attention didn't it? When I told John about what happened when I got home Tuesday evening, one of the things I said to him was, "Partly we wondered if maybe there was a mouse in there running around so we looked for signs of that..." And my dear husband whom God gave me as a partner in ministry replied, "God can use a mouse to do his work too."

Something needs to change – We need to be open to being His Church His Way – I'm not exactly sure what that means right now on the first Sunday of Lent after what happened here on Tuesday – But I sure don't want to become a barrier to his work in me, in you, in us. I believe that God has some cutting off and pruning He's ready to do in us during this Lenten season so that we can become ever more fruitful for Him. I invite you to submit yourself to his gardening work. Open your hands as a sign of releasing and receiving. *Lord, in this moment I submit my life to you. Help me to remain, to abide in you. Cut off any branch in me that is not bearing fruit for you. Go ahead, cut it off. Prune any branch in me that is ready to bear more fruit. Go ahead, prune it. I submit my life to you as the True Gardener for the sake of Christ and his Kingdom. In Jesus' name I pray, Amen.*

Now, let's pray as a congregation: *Lord, in this moment we submit our congregation to you. Help us to remain, to abide in you. We say to you, cut off any branch – any ministry, any program, any practice and pattern of thinking that is bearing NO fruit for you here. And we say, please prune any ministry, any program, any practice, and any pattern of thinking that is ripe to bear more fruit for you. Go ahead, cut away. Prune away. We let go of our mental picture of a perfect country church right now. We release our pastor from being the center of the wheel – YOU JESUS alone you are the CENTER of the wheel – and all of us, including our pastor want to move and work at the impulse of your love, alongside one another – looking to you as the source and perfecter of our faith. Put within us your vision, your passion, for our communities, for our country, and for the world where people are living in urgent physical & spiritual need. Oh Lord, all this we pray with hope, with reverence, with faith, and with grateful hearts in Jesus' name, Amen.*

In Galatians we read that it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery. Jesus died to set us free from all the walls that we put up to protect ourselves from something new, something different, something uncomfortable, something truly good. Let us come to the Table, silently listening and confessing –

The Apostle Paul said, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." Brothers and sisters, know that your sins have been forgiven and you/we have been granted a new beginning. Thanks be to God for the freedom Jesus provided for us through his broken body and shed blood to know God and to love Him with all of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. Amen.