

# SERMON DELIVERED AT AUBURN UMC, AUBURN, MICHIGAN

8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

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Text: John 15:1-11

Title: “Deep Well: Grow”

In my own practice of the spiritual disciplines, I like to use different resources as a guide to time intentionally spent with God. Early in my time as an ordained pastor one of our UM bishops produced A Guide to Prayer for Ministers and Other Servants. It had a basic order with prayer, scripture reading and then a list of readings that fit the theme for that day and then there was an invitation to write in a personal journal. Before he died, my mentor and I used that together and then we'd meet every 2 weeks to share any insights or learning we thought God may be sending our way. I used that guide for a long time, and then subsequent prayer guides came along and I used them, as well. A few years ago, Janet Stevens gave me a year of devotions written by someone she appreciated. It was another one of those devotionals that shared scripture and then a reflection by the author about that scripture. And then, of course, I journaled my own thoughts and reflections and prayers.

Lately, I've been using a book by W. Paul Jones who was a United Methodist ordained elder. He is a bit of a strange duck in that he taught theology at Yale, Princeton and St. Paul School of Theology as a United Methodist ordained elder, but somewhere in the midst of his own spiritual journey he somehow felt drawn to the Trappist order of the Roman Catholic Church and followed a path that led him to becoming an ordained Catholic Priest at which time he was no longer allowed to be an elder in the UMC.

At any rate, I met him a couple of times at seminars I've attended and came to appreciate his passion for God, his intense honesty about himself, his own failings and the personal experience with the living Christ that ultimately gives life meaning and joy. So when I received an email that he had written a new book, Becoming Who God Wants You to Be: 60 Meditations for Personal Spiritual Direction, I ordered a copy and began to use it as yet another one of my guides for personal devotions. I've been using it the last few months. I should have been finished with it by now but I confess there are days that I miss that quiet time with God for one reason or another and so I'm still spending time with W. Paul Jones as he acts at least for a time as my spiritual director.

I share this today because of the passage from John and the Psalm we recited as our call to worship. Both of them have to do with being connected with God. Both have to do with the spiritual life. We all know the psalmist isn't writing about a literal tree, nor is Jesus-- in the Gospel according to John-- instructing us about horticulture. These aren't readings meant for vine growers or arborists. They are meant for people like us, people who seek a relationship

with the living God, people who sometimes struggle with all the preoccupations and demands life brings even as we long for a life that has deeper meaning than paying the mortgage or the car payments or earning the grade in school, a life that means more than our achievements. Aren't we looking for more than that here this morning?

In John's Gospel, Jesus is sharing his final teachings with his disciples in what scholars call the "final discourse". He has already washed their feet and given them the new commandment that they love one another even as he has loved them and that by this others would know they were his disciples--when they loved one another. Now Jesus uses another metaphor to describe who he is. "I am the vine and my father is the vine grower." The disciples are the branches. We aren't the root where life is given to the rest of the plant. We aren't the trunk through which the nutrients flow and enrich everything else in the plant. We are the branches, dependent on the main trunk of the vine. We aren't the Source of life but rather dependent on the Source to give us life.

And God is the vine grower, the gardener, the one who tends to the plant's well-being. I confess that I have been troubled by the harshness of words like "thrown away...thrown into the fire, and burned." And there are some who would focus on that part of this passage as if to threaten others into faith which hardly seems consistent with Jesus' command to love. There are times, I suppose, when we might like to be the vine grower ourselves and do the cutting off and throwing into the fire. There are those moments--aren't there?--when people can be so irritating and act like jerks that we feel a compulsion to get out the saws and start hacking away. But then two things come to mind: I'm not the vine grower and sometimes I can be irritating and act like a jerk, too.

Throwing away and burning isn't the focus of Jesus' teaching here. It is not about pruning people out, but pruning out the sin within each of us so that we can bear more fruit. Because all of us have places in which we want to grow wild, places in which we don't care how our actions might cause harm to others. It happens, for example, when gossip crops up again and again without thought about what it does to people or the church, but the gossip in us doesn't care or forgets the damage done to people and community. So Jesus speaks of necessary pruning in order to promote the growing. It's a reminder to stay close to Jesus from who we receive the gift of God's Spirit and eternal life which is a gift that has nothing to do with our accomplishments.

I got up one morning this week and read from my friend, W. Paul Jones, and somehow it connected with Jesus' teaching about pruning in order to promote growth. He titles the reflection: Humbled: Letting Go to be Nothing.

An abbot[--an abbot is the head of a monastery--]preached a deeply moving homily at the funeral of one of his monks, who was both a friend of mine and a famous author and speaker. I was anxious lest the abbot be dishonest about our friend. He was not. The abbot began by acknowledging that our friend had a tendency to be pompous. In the last two years of his life, though, he suffered through "the divinely inspired process of humiliation."

Our friend was shaken by several career disappointments, including a reversal of his lifelong passion to be an abbot. The process

humbled him. Against his will, he slowly learned the gospel truth available to each of us when we let go of everything we have ever treasured. The abbot's translation of Jesus' words says it well: "The one who brings himself to nothing will find out who he is"—namely, God's. After a debilitating car accident, our friend experienced loneliness, depression, and, at moments, despair over his indescribable powerlessness. Then one morning, bound to the machines that were keeping him alive, he whispered, "I've had enough."

These are the moments when in being stripped we are open to experiencing the infinite mercy and love of God. Strange though it may seem, we need nothing more. By being nothing, having nothing, and wanting nothing, we abound in everything that matters. Paul put it this way: "Your life is hidden with Christ in God" (Col. 3:3). (p. 92, Becoming Who God Wants You to Be, W. Paul Jones)

Jones ends the story with two questions:

1. If you were stripped of all of your accomplishments what would be left?
2. Would it be enough?

What kind of pruning might you need in order to more completely experience the infinite mercy and love of God? Is there anything in your life—an attitude, expectation, habit of speech, a behavior or even thought—that could use pruning in order to grow and support the health of the entire plant? And what might God be saying to you about abiding more completely with God as Jesus stayed close to God? Can you at the end of your days recognize and experience God's love and your neighbor's love as being enough?

I believe at the heart of this teaching is love and the sharing of that love. As Jesus says in this passage,

<sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

In this journey we are all on through life, don't we all need to know we are loved? Ultimately, stripped of all of our accomplishments knowing that we are loved by God regardless of those accomplishments, to know that and truly experience God's embrace is eternal life. What greater joy is there than that?