

Weekly Reflections on the Sunday Gospel

Bishop Daniel Mueggenborg

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FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

Our Scripture passage comes from the Gospel of John 15:1–8. This passage contains another one of the famous “I AM” statements of Jesus in which He identifies Himself as the Vine and defines the disciples as the Branches. This image, as well as the actions and relationships associated with it, offers an important instruction for us as disciples.

One of the first images Jesus uses in this passage is that of pruning the vine. Pruning was done for various reasons. First, pruning was a way in which the vine grower could direct the growth of the plant by allowing new sprouts to develop only in certain areas. This image of pruning is especially important in interpreting the movement of the Holy Spirit directing the life of the Early Church. The experience of being pruned or cut back is rarely pleasant but is intended to promote and direct new growth. It is only when the Church in Jerusalem experienced persecution that the apostles were motivated to initiate their great missionary journeys to the larger world—and the Church began to grow in new directions as a result of the pruning that had occurred (see Acts 8:1). Sometimes God wants our lives to develop in new and specific directions, and one of the ways the Lord can motivate that growth within us is by blocking growth in our existing direction. There is a common expression that captures this meaning of pruning that says, “When God closes one door, He opens another one.” Branches that are full of life are not deterred in their growth by obstacles or setbacks; rather, living branches are constantly seeking ways to burst forth with new life in new directions. The challenge for a disciple is to seek that new direction in which God wants to direct our efforts for the good of the Gospel.

When have you experienced this pruning that blocked one direction in your life and motivated you to pursue new directions of growth?

Why do some people respond only with frustration, self-pity, or anger when they experience this pruning while others respond with motivation for growth, hope, and creativity?

How can we as a Church help people better understand frustrating or painful situations as a motivation for new growth?

How is God pruning the Church today, and what do you think is the new growth the Lord wants to motivate?

Second, additional pruning occurred at two different times. One pruning occurred in late winter (February or March) and involved cutting off the “dead” branches that could not bear fruit. This winter pruning was to ensure the health of the vine and to provide as much space as possible for

the living branches to develop. Jesus speaks to this pruning in vs. 2 and 6. In the life of the Early Church, there were some disciples who were in the Christian community but were actually “dead branches”. Judas would be such an example because we were told that he belonged to the realm of Satan but was still sitting at table with the disciples (see Jn 13:2). Jesus specifically tells us that such disciples become dead branches because they fail to abide in Him. As disciples, it is important for us to remember that we are the ones who have the responsibility to accept the life of God offered to us or not to accept it. Accepting the gift of God’s life means participating in grace-filled opportunities of prayer, the Sacraments, and actions of selfless love for others. When we take advantage of these opportunities, we are abiding in Christ. When we fail to take advantage of these opportunities, we are cutting ourselves off from grace. Our physical presence in the Church does not necessarily mean that we are living members of the Body of Christ. We have to be spiritually united with Jesus in order to be living members of His Body; otherwise, we are just dead branches taking up room and obstructing others in their growth.

How do dead branches damage the overall health of the vine (both in the literal sense of a plant and in the analogous sense of the Church)?

How does this understanding of pruning motivate you to pursue additional sources of grace in your life?

How can we as a faith community revitalize the dead branches to make them alive in Christ?

When have you been a dead branch, and what led you to renew your life-giving relationship with Jesus (“abiding in Him”) so as to become a living branch?

Sometimes disciples can allow themselves to become complacent with sinful situations or habits. These parts of their lives become dead branches that occupy time and energy but are not united with Christ. How does this image of pruning speak to these situations?

Third, another pruning took place in the late summer months (usually August). This pruning involved removing the smaller shoots on the vine so that the nutrients could be directed to the main fruit-bearing branches. This focused concentration of nutrients would allow the vine to produce the most abundant fruit. If the smaller shoots were not pruned away then the nutrients would be directed in a variety of different ways that might create more foliage but would not produce more fruit. This is an important lesson for disciples because there is no shortage of ways in which we can spend our time and energy. However, we cannot do everything, and in order to do some things well we must necessarily limit and focus our involvements. To use the image of the Gospel, we need to “prune” away those things that have become distractions in our lives so that we can focus our time and energy in the direction God wants. Jesus’ Word helps us accomplish this important pruning of life because the Lord reveals to us the values of the Gospel that can help prioritize and focus our efforts.

What are the principle values and priorities Jesus gives us through His teaching?

When have you had to prune away otherwise good efforts and involvements because they were distracting you from the “main thing” you needed to pursue?

Where might people find themselves if they don’t prune away their distractions?

In which ways can we remain fruitless by not accomplishing the “main thing”?

What keeps people from wanting to prune away distractions in their lives?

How can a faith community help people tell the difference between what is a priority and what is a distraction?

Jesus ends this passage with the very important statement of verse 8 when He says, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.” Jesus was entrusted with the mission to glorify the Father (see Jn 12:27–28). Our Lord accomplished this mission by manifesting the love of God on Calvary. Jesus tells us in this passage that we will continue to glorify the Father when we bear “fruit”. “Fruit”, then, refers to the love a disciple shows in laying down his life for a friend (see Jn 15:13). In doing so, disciples are fulfilling the command of Jesus to “love one another as I have loved you” (see Jn 15:9, 12, 17). The love of Jesus that we receive from our communion with Him must flow through us and be manifested in our relationships with others. This visible manifestation of God’s love in the life of a faithful Christian draws others into that communion and creates additional disciples. When others are touched by the love of God through us then we are “bearing fruit”, and the Father is glorified because God, who is love, is being made manifest in the world. When we become this conduit of God’s love affecting the lives of others then, Jesus says, we prove that we are His disciples. What a challenging definition of discipleship! Disciples are not just recipients of God’s grace and love; to be a disciple means that we are active conduits of that grace and love to others. If we are not bearing fruit, we are not disciples according to this definition given by Jesus. It is important for us to remember that this teaching is given in the context of the Last Supper, which is a Eucharistic setting. The expectation to “bear fruit” and to be a conduit of God’s grace becomes particularly daunting when we realize the necessity of passing on to others the presence of Jesus whom we have received in the Eucharist. If we are only receiving the Lord, but not actively sharing the Lord, then we are not bearing fruit and we are not disciples.

How does Jesus’ definition of discipleship challenge you?

How does the context of this teaching within the Last Supper change the way you approach the Eucharist?

What is the “fruit” you have produced this past week as a result of sharing in the life of Christ in the Eucharist?

Who has become a disciple because of your Christian witness?

What leads a person to think they can be a disciple without bearing fruit?