

Homily – Sunday May 2<sup>nd</sup> 2021  
Rev Judy Steers

*“Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”*

There are a lot of gardeners in this community, and I imagine many of you find resonance with this gospel, which provides a very striking metaphor as a guide to nurture our spiritual lives. It goes without saying that our health and well-being depend on sustaining connections. Our spiritual health depends on staying connected to the sources that remind us of our belonging and belovedness.

All of this has been brought sharply into focus for us of course in the past 13 months. It is extraordinary to think of all the ways that we have learned to stay connected – with our families, our workplaces, our parish groups, our friends and with God. It’s a time when we have had to become deeply creative and been called to step out of our comfort zones.

This past week, I attended a clergy day with other priests and layworkers of the diocese. One of the exercises we were asked to do was to look back over these past 13 months and create a time line for ourselves of the moments of consolation, and of desolation. I was amazed both with my own timeline and those of others who shared in our small group, how many more moments of consolation there were than of desolation. Perhaps because this time line is a period ‘outside’ of typical time, when we are all sharing a common experience that takes us into places where we’ve never been, and sharpens us to what is most important. Perhaps because the overall experience has really highlighted how deeply significant are the things we miss and we can’t do. And it has also highlighted how deeply vulnerable we are.

I discovered a few things about vines this week. One is that neglected vines eventually stop producing altogether – they lack light or air or space to produce well. Too much energy is expended in too many directions. Pruning is an art that takes skill, knowledge and discernment. Another is that, unlike shrubs or trees, where prudent gardeners only remove 30% of the plant, the vine is pruned by up to 90%. To look at it, it seems like all the growth is gone, and there is

nothing left but a stumpy trunk with a few sticks jutting out of it. The part that is pruned is the part that will not continue to be life-giving.

This time in the life of our world, our communities, our church, our parish could perhaps be thought of as that intense pruning time. The lush vines covered in foliage and fruit are cut far back to the point of seeming almost nothingness. It's hard to imagine what can come out of such a stump. It's a fallow time – of winter winds, sharp weather, soaking rains and waiting for growth to begin again. This makes me think of our visioning process, which so many of you have participated in. The time of pruning is a time of rethinking 'what is REALLY important to us?' or 'what if we let go of all the things that are binding our fruitfulness?' A pandemic time, with seeming disconnection, isolation, nothing-the-same sounds like an odd time to be visioning for fruitful growth. But like the vines that are pruned to produce abundance, so too is this time helping us to step closer to and cherish what is deeply important to us. It is reaffirming the value of connection. I have heard many people say "I feel like I know people in the congregation way better than I ever have". I have heard many people say "I hope that, as a society, we don't just go back to the way things always were – I feel like we've learned something important, if we take the time to think about what that is and maybe make good choices as we come through this time". Because, this time has also reminded us deeply of our interconnectedness with the wider community. Our lives depend on the labour of those whose work leaves them more exposed and at risk. It is a tragic realization that the pandemic has fallen most harshly on those who have fewer choices about how they live, how they work. Our calling as Christians is to strive for justice and the dignity of every human being and to live knowing that our lives are deeply interconnected.

When the vine is pruned, the strong, rooted main trunk remains standing, waiting to feed the tiny buds and the fragile stems as they emerge into the warmth and light. Jesus says "I am the vine, you are the branches. Remain in me so that you can bear much fruit".

As I said at the beginning, our spiritual health depends on staying connected to the sources that remind us of our belonging and belovedness. Out of knowing we belong, and that we are beloved leads us to a place of knowing that all people belong and are beloved. From this comes a way of being that gives life to others. Let us move deeper into this knowing as we live these seasons of both pruning and growth.