

So, I'd like to take a quick poll.

Please raise your hand if you consider yourself a gardener.

If you like to cultivate a garden, tinker with the plants in your yard, if you know a thing or two about how things grow and how to take care of them, raise your hand.

Okay, a few of you.

Now, I confess I know precious little about gardening.

I've tried keeping outdoor plants alive, but I can't quite get it.

I am good, however, at maintaining many plants inside my home, but outside is another story.

I keep the lawn mowed and I enjoy the flowers and plants that Peggy put in the yard when she was the pastor.

But for those of you who are unlike me, who do know how to garden, then you presumably also know the importance of pruning.

You know that pruning is an essential part of gardening.

It can seem counter-intuitive because you are literally cutting off branches, but what you wise gardeners know is that that plants like to be pruned.

They need annual haircuts and long to be freed of their rank growth.

You know how to cut out the things that don't belong, purge the negatives, to open up the leaf canopies to new life, to allow the sun to hit the part of the plant that you want to grow and flourish.

Pruning is about getting rid of the dead branches or the branches that don't serve the plant anymore, to make way for new life, new growth.

It's quite an art, because you can prune too little and your plant is out of control, or you can prune too much so that you've massacred your plant and it may or may not make a recovery.

You have to inspect the plant from all angles, think about where the sun hits it, which branches you want to keep, and what you need to prune so that they can be healthy.

Now, today's text from the Bible is quite the story about gardening, including pruning.

This section is from the Gospel of John, and what Jesus says to his disciples is part of his "I am" statements.

Today, he tells them that he is the vine, God is the vine-grower and his disciples are the branches.

I like to think of this as Jesus being the vine and the church and its ministries being the branches.

All that grows out of our abiding relationship, all the ways we worship together and serve the community together and live and grow together, these are all branches that come from the vine, our intimate, abiding relationship with Jesus.

Well you know all that stuff I just said about pruning?

If we are the branches, then the truth is that sometimes things need to be pruned away in order to keep the whole plant healthy.

Unnecessary growth can take away vital nutrients and resources, from the branches, which are trying to thrive and flourish and produce much fruit.

That growth also takes up space on the vine and prevents new growth and new life, new ministries.

We as a church, need to make sure that everything we do is rooted in our relationship with Jesus, that it's connected directly to the vine.

If a certain ministry in our life together isn't rooted in Jesus' call for us, then we need to prune it, let it go.

If it isn't life-giving anymore, we need to bless it and prune it.

If some branch of ministry has grown off of another branch and it's really disconnected from God's call for us, as a body of faith, then we might need to cut it away.

If we ask ourselves why we do something and the best answer we are able to come up with is "because we always have," then guess what?

It's time to get out those pruning sheers.

The thing is that we need Jesus, we need to stay rooted in him so that our ministries are vital, so that they are fruitful.

The vine which connects all of us together is our belief in Jesus, our commitment to him and his teachings, that's why we are called Christians or Christ-ones.

If we are doing something together which is not directly connected to his call for us and our lives, then our energies would probably be better spent doing things which do directly answer the call to live faithfully as Christ-followers in this world.

But we have to prune that old thing away first before we can redirect our energies.

In our world, we get so caught up with independence, with self-sufficiency.

We say that WE are Christ's hands and feet in the world.

We are the ones God needs, we are the ones who are going to carry our faith forward into the future, we are the ones we have been waiting for.

While this may be true on some level, we have to make sure we don't slowly segue into believing that Jesus needs us more than we need Jesus.

The vine and the branches have a symbiotic relationship, and as I shared with the kids earlier, the branches definitely need the vine.

They become disconnected, they die.

We need to stay rooted in Jesus, we need to abide in him.

Actually, the word 'abide' occurs eight times in this short passage.

The writer of the Gospel of John was not messing around, he was trying to communicate a very specific kind of relationship between Jesus and his disciples.

When you abide with someone, it's a very intimate, deep kind of relationship.

It's not just walking alongside someone, it's setting up camp, it's making your home together, it's committing to each other either as partners or friends or fellow Christians on the journey.

And here's the thing, it has to be mutual.

You can't abide with someone if they aren't willing to reciprocate.

That's why Jesus says, "abide in me *as I abide in you.*"

That's why he uses the vine and branch metaphor to explain this depth of relationship because the branch can't survive without the vine, and actually, the vine can't survive without the branches either.

Abiding together means admitting that we need each other.

All that we do, as a church, together, has to abide in Christ, and we need to remember this, lest we forget it and need to prune back our wild growth.

Now, there are two important contextual points about this passage that it's important for you to know.

Then you might see why all this talk about mutual abiding had so much weight and power.

The first point is that in the Gospel of John, Jesus tells his disciples about this mutual abiding on the eve of his crucifixion.

He knows he is going to die.

So presumably he is trying to tell them that he's leaving them in body, but not in spirit.

He's not abandoning them.

And he needs them to stay connected to him and to one another.

Just because Jesus was going to be killed, he didn't want any of them (the branches) to cut themselves off from the community they had formed.

The second point is that the community that John is writing to has experienced major trauma.

Jesus was crucified and resurrected about 60 years prior, and by the time they hear these words, they have been scattered like seeds, thrown out of the synagogue, and have plenty of reason to feel abandoned.

John writes to tell them that they have not been cut from the vine, and they are called to bear more fruit, to witness to the Gospel message even in hostile times.

This reminds us that even when it feels really hard to stay true to our faith, true to our commitment to Christ, that Jesus' earliest disciples did it, and we can too.

In fact, we need to, if not for ourselves, but for the generations that will come after us.

A friend of mine recently wrote me a note that said, *"Remember, a church is always one generation away from dying."*

She wasn't the first person to say it, but I could find anyone to attribute the quote to.

What that means to me is that it only takes one generation to make a lot of poor decisions, which can ultimately lead to the demise of a local church.

We have been around for over 285 years, but we can't take it for granted that it will be around for another 285.

We have to make it so.

We can ensure this by constantly evaluating how we are spending our time and energy and asking ourselves, "Is this ministry or event or worship service, is it abiding in Christ? Or does it need the pruning sheers?"

That might sound kind of harsh, but remember, good, exacting pruning is what helps plants flourish and produce more fruit.

Good, faithful pruning in the church is what can help us flourish and produce more spiritual fruits.

All of this talk of vines and branches and pruning is future oriented.

The purpose is to make sure the plant, vines and branches, thrive in the future and produce more fruit in the days to come.

You prune now because you know you'll reap the benefits in the future.

The problem is that the church has a tendency to look to the past, what we did, what we were like, who was here.

But we need to be like that wise gardener and focus on the future.

Where we are going, what we are going to do, the communities we are going to serve, the people who will sit in these pews 50 or 100 years from now.

So friends, let us make sure that all that we are doing abides in Christ, the vine, and if it doesn't, may we have the courage to listen to God, the vine-grower, and prune that branch off of the vine, that we might bear much fruit, for the sake of those who will come after us.

Amen.