

The Fifth Sunday of Easter May 2, 2021

The busiest time in a vineyard is that of harvest time. When all the grapes are collected and brought in to be turned into wine. It is a time of joy because all the hard work has finally paid off. In many places, the harvest is celebrated with festivals of singing and dancing.

The second busiest time in the vineyard takes place after the harvest. Once all the grapes have been collected and there is nothing left on the vines, the caretakers then start to prune back the branches. Just about all the vines are pruned back all the way to the trunk. If you have ever seen a vineyard after it has been pruned, it hardly looks like a vineyard at all. Instead, it looks like rows and rows of trunks with no branches and no grapes on them. If you didn't know better, you would think they were dead. It is hard to imagine that grapes will ever grow on them again.

But, this time of pruning is vital. It clears away the clutter so that the vine can grow back even stronger and bear even more grapes. The vineyard may look withered and dead but it is really only asleep and preparing itself for an even greater harvest.

In today's gospel, Jesus compares Himself to a vine. Those who believe in Him are like the branches, and God the Father is the vine grower. All those who remain in Jesus by keeping His word draw life from Him and bear abundant grapes. Those who break off from Him and try to go it on their own wither up and die on the ground.

God the Father, as the vine grower, works to pull away the branches that have fallen off the vine so they won't clutter things up. He also works to prune the branches that are bearing grapes so that they will be stronger and even more fruitful.

Just as there are seasons in a vineyard - a time to harvest the grapes and a time to prune back the vine - so there are seasons in our journey of faith as a Church. There are times when the Church is vibrant, experiencing rapid growth, and bearing fruit all over the world. That is the situation of the Church in today's first reading from the Acts of the Apostles.

There are other seasons, however, when the Church is being pruned back. There have been times in our history when, for one reason or another, the Church seems to be asleep, we aren't growing as quickly, and our efforts at transforming the world through the love of Jesus just do not seem to be working.

If we were to be honest with ourselves, as a Church, we seem to be in a season of pruning. There are many reasons why God the Father has been at work pruning His Church.

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We can admit that an abuse of power took place with some of our clergy. They took advantage of the trust people had in them and used it to benefit themselves. Many people were hurt in the process and our reputation as a Church suffered greatly. We will be dealing with the fallout from that crisis for years to come.

We also became complacent. When all our churches were full, we didn't see a need to evangelize. Instead of reaching out to people with the good news of salvation and witnessing to them about our faith, we were content to just fulfill our Sunday duty. Living our faith became simply a matter of showing up to church every week. We may have given money for the maintenance of the church building but we weren't involved in the church's mission of transforming the world through the love of Jesus.

For those reasons, and many more, God the Father has had to prune back His Church. It is not a punishment. Everything He does, He does with love. Rather, He is removing the dried up branches so that we can grow even more and bear more fruit.

Like a vineyard that has been pruned back, those who look at the state of the Church today might think we are dead. Those without faith have counted us out. They can't imagine that we will ever come back to life and bear fruit again. But we know differently. We have the promise of Jesus Christ Himself who said He would be with His Church until the end of time. He promises that, if we remain in Him, we will bear much fruit. So, even in this time when we seem to be shrinking rather than growing, we know that a spring time growth spurt is not far off.

In today's gospel, Jesus tells us what we should be doing during this time. We should remain in Him. That is the only way we will ever bear fruit. Jesus goes on to say that, apart from Him, we can do nothing. But, if we remain in Him, then all things are possible.

How do we "remain in Jesus"? St John tells us how in today's second reading. "We should believe in the name of...Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us. Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them." So, we remain in Jesus through faith, believing that He died to save us and that He is alive and active in us and in the world. We remain in Jesus by keeping the commandments, in particular the great commandment of love. When we love our neighbor, then the love of Jesus remains in us. Such love shows itself in the works of mercy - feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, visiting prisoners, praying for others, warning sinners, and working for justice.

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Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, and the Father is the vine grower. God wants to see us fully alive and heavy with fruit like a vine with abundant grapes. If He prunes us, it is so we can do just that. God the Father is glorified in the fruit we bear in love.

At this Mass, we gather together all the fruit that we have borne as a result of God's love at work within us and we offer them up together with the bread and wine that will be transformed into the Body and Blood of Christ. In the process, we will be nourished so that we can go out and bear even more fruit for the glory of God.