

“Born to Bear Fruit”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts

April 28, 2024 - Fifth Sunday of Easter

[Acts 8:26-40; John 15:1-8](#)

It is a wonderful springtime morning, and I hope you saw on your way into the church today the beautiful daffodils that are blooming throughout the common as well as the many other signs of springtime life all around, such as fruit trees flowering and others now beginning to send out their bright green leaves. For this lovely, colorful time of the year, I am truly grateful.

I am also reminded that it's once again time, after a long winter's break, to be active in all kinds of springtime yardwork. Here at the church, for this year's children's mission project, our children will be installing pollinator plants and flowers next Sunday, and to get ready for this, Denise K. was working here earlier this week preparing the soil where this little garden is to be installed, just outside of the sanctuary doors, by turning it and adding some new gardening soil and nutrients to help our young gardeners' plants to flourish. And we've had lots of cleaning and other prep work being done on the flower beds and other spaces on the church property thanks to Lynn H., our Scouts, Rob, Lenny, Brian, and others.

At the home I share with Christine and Opal, where we enjoy working on a grassy lawn and on a variety of shrubs, bushes, and trees, we've also started our springtime chores, including the essential task of pruning, cutting back plants that have become overgrown, cutting off sections of others that are dry and lifeless, and even chopping down to the ground some plants that are otherwise healthy and happy being just as they are, but that need to be cut back each year to allow for them to grow and look their best. This hard pruning seems cruel and destructive, but it is what some plants, like the rose bushes in front of my house, actually need to flourish.

In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus teaches his disciples that God prunes us, like a vine grower prunes vines, for our optimal growth. God the Grower prunes us in the springtime, and throughout the year, to prepare us to grow so that we can produce good fruit in abundance. Sometimes the pruning work of God is gentle: A clip here and a snip there; other times, however, God prunes us back

hard, maybe even taking us, it may seem, all the way back to the ground. But always, the pruning work of God is done in love by a Creator who knows best how we can be healthy and productive and is always faithfully at work in us, helping us to flourish and thrive as people.

Surely we participate in God's pruning activity, especially when we need to cut out of our own lives habits and behaviors that cause us or others harm, or when we need to add to our lives practices that will allow for healthier growth to sprout in and out of our lives. But the most important task we have as branches of the vine growing in God's vineyard, is to stay connected to the source of our life. Just as the rosebushes can handle being chopped back hard as long as their roots still run deep into the nutrient-holding soil, we can handle being pruned when the root of our being stays connected to God. Jesus said that he is the Vine and we are the connected branches that have been and are being pruned so that his life can fill us and nourish us and cause us to grow and sprout and produce fruit.

And how is it that we can be better connected to Jesus the Vine? How can we abide in Christ and allow Christ to abide in us? When we let the teachings of Christ -- his word -- live in us through our own living, we are better connected to the Vine. When we follow his way of living in love -- his way of feeding the hungry, of healing the broken and brokenhearted, and of welcoming the unwelcomed -- we remain in the vine and we produce the good, life-giving fruit that God desires for us to produce.

One of the many wonderful stories in the book of Acts that we're looking at during this Easter season that can help us better understand what it means to be producers of God's fruit is from today's lesson in which we heard about how one of followers of the Christian way, a person named Philip, was called by an angel of God to go out from where he was in Jerusalem to a road that leads out of town toward Gaza. It was there on that road heading away from Jerusalem that he met the official treasurer of the queen of the Ethiopians, a man who was a eunuch, or one who was castrated, as was commonly done to boys or men who would be serving as members of royal courts so as to help their sovereigns be more confident in knowing that the children in their households were actually their own. The unnamed eunuch was traveling in a chariot, as one who held a lofty station in his own land might have, when Philip came to him on the road leading

to Gaza and began to talk with him about a passage of the book of Isaiah that the Ethiopian official had been reading, likely because he was a person known as a God-fearer, one who was not part of the Jewish family, but who still worshipped the God of Israel.

God-fearers had a place in Jerusalem's temple called the Court of the Gentiles, where they could go to worship, but it was at the perimeter of the temple, and Gentiles were not welcome to venture beyond this court. And Gentiles such as the man from Ethiopia, who was a castrated male, would not have been welcome even there, as eunuchs were prohibited from having access to any part of the temple. So while the treasurer of Ethiopia was a lofty person in his own land, he would have been an excluded outsider in Jerusalem.

When Philip came to him and interpreted for him that the message of Isaiah, that God would bring justice and peace to all those who were humiliated, was fulfilled in Christ's sacrifice, the eunuch asked Philip, "What then would prevent *me*, an excluded outsider, from being baptized, and so be welcomed as a full part of the family of Christ-followers?" The answer is that *nothing* would prevent the outsider from being fully included, and so they found some water, and Philip baptized him right there into the family and faith of Jesus Christ.

An important lesson we are taught in this story is that we are called to an extravagantly welcoming, radically inclusive faith. *All* people are welcome, no matter who they are, where they come from, however lofty or lowly they are, whoever they are sexually, or however they express their gender or any other aspects of their being. All are welcome to participate in the Vine life, being connected to Christ and to Christ's church.

So we welcome all kinds of branches -- just as they are -- to be next to us on the one vine, and as we are all connected to this one Vine, we welcome all kinds of people to be connected to us. In welcoming one another in this way, we demonstrate God's life in us, producing the good, life-giving fruit that blesses us and all those around us.

Today, let us abide in Christ and Christ's inclusive love. May God prune off any excluding ways in us that we might produce better fruit of inclusive love. May the lovely fruit of God-given love, joy, peace, and hope be within us and among us and bless the world through us. Amen.