

Seeing things: John 15:1-8

by [Stan Wilson](#) in the [May 2, 2006](#) issue

I loved Denny Spear, my first pastor, because he knew my name and greeted me weekly. What I didn't know was that Brother Spear, as I called him, was a man of great conviction. He had resigned from his previous church one Sunday when his members voted not to admit black worshipers. Denny and his wife had four children at that time and nowhere to go until he came to us at Dunwoody Baptist, and he wouldn't come to us until we adopted an open membership policy.

Spear says there was no bitterness in the departure, that he resigned because he loved the church. Knowing how he loved us, I believe that. He resigned because he knew that his presence after the vote would only be disruptive. He couldn't remain silent on the issue, but hoped that the conversation would continue without him, and that one day the church would flourish again. It did, but slowly. When he was invited back to lead a retreat 40 years later, there was one person of color in the retreat group.

Forty years later and one person of color? I think of a story about a patient Gardener who threw a little extra manure around a plant and gave it time to produce (Luke 13:6-9). This Gardener created the world in beauty and set us in the middle of a garden to till and keep it (Gen. 2:15), then called out workers like Denny Spear. I believe that this Gardener would take great delight in a small shoot growing out of a formerly dead stump—all the more if that vine had been cut back 40 years before.

In John 15 Jesus continues that horticultural storyline. He recalls the vine, God's beloved community, planted on a fertile hill that was carefully cleared and prepared (Isa. 5). God is the Vinegrower, the one who created the world and continues to love it even though it has become infested with briars and thorns. God is determined to see a living organism flourish and grow on the ravaged landscape of a sinful world, until it can become a source of healing for all the nations (Rev. 22:2).

"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." John presents a beautiful image here—except that as any gardener knows, there is hard work

involved. The good plants are fragile, the weeds are sturdy. Dead growth must be pruned out, and healthy growth must be pruned to make way for more growth. All of this pruning is necessary to make room for God's reign to flourish and grow.

Last year our church hosted Kingsley Perera, general secretary of the Baptist Sangamaya (Union) of Sri Lanka. Sri Lanka has been mostly Buddhist for 2,500 years. Christians came 500 years ago, bringing colonial rule and religious persecution with them, but since 1947 there has been general religious freedom. Now aggressive Christian missionaries are stirring up angry resistance. Hundreds of churches have been burned, and there have been attempts to outlaw Christian conversion.

Every time he told the story, somebody asked him what his church would do if Christian conversion were outlawed, and he always replied, "Suffer. Our people are prepared to suffer." Kingsley actually believes that it might be necessary for his people to suffer, that this might contribute somehow to the healing of their land, and he is prepared for it. "We believe that if we are persecuted, the church will only grow. Some nominal members might be pruned away, but that will only make us stronger. Study history, and you will see that the church always grows under persecution."

I have read that the key to church growth is parking, not pruning, but Jesus has another vision of church growth: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24). On the way to the airport I asked Kingsley if he'd ever heard a quote from the early church about the blood of martyrs being the seed of the church.

"Tertullian," he replied instantly.

A few weeks ago a trusted parishioner looked over our year-end financial statement and lamented, "We're dying on the vine here. We're not meeting our budget. We're not attracting enough young families. How are we ever going to grow if we don't attract young families?" Later that day I passed a decrepit old building that once housed a "growing" church. Members had built an addition and the church had grown wildly—until the neighborhood changed. The young families moved to the suburbs (where my church is), leaving the church with heavy debt and high utility bills, and soon it went bankrupt and dissolved. Now a tiny new church stands on the lot.

Who knows whether we are growing or dying? Only the Vinegrower. Are we a weed that looks like the vine or are we the real thing? Only our fruit will tell. How do we bear fruit? By dying.

My home church, a big, flourishing congregation with lots of ministries, was once an old-style, small-town church. When new neighbors began to come to Dunwoody Baptist, the old members met and decided to disband. They weren't leaving the community. They recognized that they were going to need to start over if they were to embrace their new neighbors. They disbanded one week and started over the next.

What a hopeful, courageous act. These wise church members submitted to the vinegrower's knife, letting go of a church they must have loved to make room for people they didn't know. It is no wonder that I first believed the gospel there. I bet that many of those members were gardeners.