

Lonely pruning (John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21; Psalm 22:25-31)

Sometimes it seems that the vine grower has prepared the vineyard and gone off to a remote island where things are warmer and nicer.

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April 27, 2018

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I wandered in a vineyard on a slope leaning toward a lake. There was a skiff of snow on the ground and the gray sky overhead seemed to come close, pushing down toward me with clouds that settled across the entire face of the water. It seemed to be wilderness, or at least it felt that way because I was alone. It was stark.

Starker yet were the vines. I understood, because I've been taught, that this was the season of waiting, of quiet fallow—but it was stark. The vine growers go off in the late winter for greener places: the Caribbean, Mexico, California. It's their time to vacation, anticipating the daily farming that a vineyard requires in summer and fall. The vine grower gets a break.

For me, wrapped in a wool scarf and a toque, it was bleak. I pulled off a glove and touched a branch; it was strong and, though it bent under my fingers, it was connected by sinew to the vine.

“Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” When we are pruned, we lose something that looked lovely for the moment. Perhaps later we realize we've lost something that would not be connected fully enough to the vine to bear luscious fruit. Or would it? Perhaps we don't know.

When we are pruned, we can be lonely. Sometimes it seems that the vine grower has prepared the vineyard and gone off to a remote island where things are warmer and nicer. Where am I? Abandoned, forsaken: on a bleak hillside, soaking up winter gray.

For the shoulder-height branches on the vines around me, pruning was passive. The vine grower arrived on the hillside, did her work, and then left for vacation. For us, though, our vocation is a relational thing. We are active, not passive. We shoulder the weight of our pastoral calling. We have agency. And to bear fruit we have to trust that God is with us in our decision-making, our justice work, our preaching.

“Love is from God.” “Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.” “Perfect love casts out fear.” First John sounds didactic; I hear it as teaching, which it is. How do you teach abiding truth? How do you teach life and love?

Ah, but John calls us “Beloved”—so I will listen. I hear the breeze. I feel the truth. “Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God.”

I remove my toque, put it on the snowy ground and sit on it. Now with my ears uncovered, I can hear the breeze. I can feel the wind on my face and see it moving across the lake. I know that I cannot hear the vines growing but I understand that they have been tended. I run my fingers across the tip of the vine, then along its stalwart length. It is alright. It is simply waiting. I think of patience; I will sit here till I can manage the cloud overhead, till I can shoulder my work again. I remember that Psalm 22 begins in affliction and ends with praise for help received. “The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the LORD. May your hearts live forever! ... For dominion belongs to the LORD, and he rules over the nations.” The psalm begins in loneliness and ends in a community of friends: eschatology in a vineyard.