

***“Fruit That Will Last”***  
***Psalm 1:1-6***  
***John 15:1-5; 10 -12, 16***

Many of my favorite stories come from the years our children were young. One centers around the youngest, and came to mind as we were preparing to welcome a Congolese family. Joe was probably around ten years old at the time. He and his brother Chay had arrived from Cambodia, after spending a few years in a refugee camp in Thailand. Their parents were dead, there were no known relatives, and so at four and eight years old respectively, they arrived at Bradley International Airport, along with about a dozen other children in similar circumstances, to meet their new families. They came with very few health records, They had been assigned birth dates because no actual records existed and, most importantly, they came with a mixed bag of emotions. Fears and anxieties were expected. What was not particularly expected was their wonder and excitement at things our culture takes for granted. Fascinated by power switches, lights and televisions lit up or dimmed at unexpected moments. Toilets flushed more often than usual as one, or both of them, would look with awe as water disappeared and reappeared. It was a time of discovery for them and their new family as we all learned different ways and habits. Joe, the youngest of the two, seemed slower to learn than Chay, but he did learn.

Joe, even as he progressed in school, experienced times when he showed poor judgement, even though he knew better. We ultimately learned Joe had suffered some serious brain damage that affected his ability to process consequences and to make good judgments. Where or when the damage was done remains unknown. But a series of physical and psychological tests confirmed the damage. On the lighter side of his limitations, one day when he was home with his older sister and brothers, he decided to weed the yard, which his siblings thought was a good way to keep him busy. When I came home I was shocked. There, in the front yard, were bare spots where beautiful growths of pachysandra had been when I left. What happened? Joe had pulled all of them out without asking what they were. He did so because he knew I did not want weeds in my yard. When my indignant “How could you?” attitude subsided, I acknowledged it was well intentioned, but lacked information about what made a weed a weed. Pachysandra now serves as a symbol of knowing the difference about what to keep and what not to keep, what to do and what not to do. The difference helped me understand our scripture reading today somewhat differently than I had before. In many ways it is about knowing the difference between unwanted weeds and wanted plantings.

John, our gospel writer this morning, uses a lot of symbolism in speaking about Jesus. In today's passage he uses the symbol of Jesus as the vine and God as the vine grower. With this image, John sees God as the source of Jesus' authority, and wisdom, and claim on our lives. Just as a vine thrives on the rain and nutrients in the earth, so Jesus thrives on God and the power and authority inherent in that reality. But this reality comes with a condition. He must submit to the will of the vine maker. He must (as must all followers of Jesus) submit to God's pruning, God's decision to allow him to bear much fruit. ***He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit, he prunes to make it bear more fruit...abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*** The following verses speak of the consequences of not submitting to the pruning needed to grow in Jesus, in not allowing ourselves to grow fruit worthy of his disciples. We (I) sometimes don't want to submit, wanting to go, my own way. It helps me at such times to remember the reason for submitting to the pruner. John captures the reason for Christian discipline. It is not as penance, it is not punitive. It is just because living as Jesus lives gives meaning and purpose to one's life, and it takes discipline to achieve.

***I have said these things so that my joy may be in you so that your joy may be complete.***

The other day I had the distinct pleasure of working with a member of another congregation as we prepared for our refugee family. He asked me if I knew he had not been enthusiastic about sponsoring a refugee family when his pastor first mentioned it. That surprised me because he seemingly committed heart and soul to this effort. He has given hours and hours of himself to see the project succeed. "What changed your mind so completely?" Can you guess what he said? "I knew Jesus would want me to, and I am so glad I remembered that." The joy on his face as he told me this was unmistakable. It reminded me of what happens when we allow the love, personified in Jesus, to be the pruning hook in our lives. I knew what it meant to have complete joy.

***I have said these things so that my joy may be in you so that your joy may be complete.***

What a promise. Who of us doesn't want complete joy? In this world which often appears to offer more cause for despair than it does for joy, which often offers more questions than answers, the words from my new friend and the look on his face erased all doubt. The world is often a messy place, our lives are often "messed up".

Regardless facing the messiness as we know Jesus faced it, assured of what the eternal God wanted of him, we will, with him, declare, ***Father, into thy hands, I commit my spirit.*** And in that commitment, we will recognize the weeds and pull them up, roots and all, so that good fruit will grow in their place. We will understand that the Pruner knows the plants that will bear fruit that will last.

***This is my commandment that you love one another as I have loved you...You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last...***

We are all called by the same one who called Jesus. We are being pruned for the task given. We may not all be called to the same expression, the same way of following Jesus, but we are all called to a ministry of loving one another through concrete acts. We are all called to ask ourselves what it is specifically that God would have us do at any particular moment. When we do, we realize and accept that we have been chosen. We have been appointed to bear fruit, fruit that will last, and to look within ourselves for God's desire for our lives, and act on it to the best of our abilities. It is then that we will know the true joy for which we crave.

***I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.***

May we bear fruit that will last, as a congregation and as individuals, allowing God, the Eternal Love, to do the necessary pruning. May we know, and live, in joy. May we be a plants that bear fruit that will last, the fruit of love which is the one commandment Jesus insisted we keep.