

Bishop Loya's Sermon

ECMN Convention Eucharist

September 27, 2020

I was talking to an old friend recently, who was telling me about a cherry tree right outside the window of his home office. Like all fruit trees, cherry trees require a lot of maintenance. They have to be pruned, and coddled, and the conditions have to be just right for them to thrive and produce fruit. He described looking at his tree one day late in the season, and thinking, "well, I can either hire an arborist to come and carefully trim and shape the tree, or I can just wait for the storms to come and knock out branches and essentially accomplish the same thing."

That seemed to both of us a perfect image for what the church is experiencing in this moment. We have known for years that things have been changing and shifting. Our long-held and treasured models for ministry, and wider structures have been on shaky ground, and have grown less and less viable over time. Some of us have tried to do some artful pruning here and there, but most of us have simply deferred the inevitable. And then, a big spring blizzard arrived in the form of a global pandemic in early March, and started bringing down branches with it. As we were still trying to get the yard in order, another storm hit when yet one more black man was murdered by police right on our Minnesota doorstep, and the tree was shaken to its core again, exposing all manner of toxic, racist rot that had been lingering inside for generations. There is so much right now that we simply do not know, but one thing we can be sure of is that this old tree will have a different shape when the snow finally melts, the ice thaws, and the flowers begin to bud again in the spring.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus reminds us that no matter how stormy the world can be, and no matter how uncertain the world can look, we are always called to return to the one main calling of abiding in him. says, "I am the vine, and my Father is the vine grower. . . Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

Here, at the beginning of a new episcopate, when we are embarking on a program year unlike any we have known, we can be sure that the coming season will be one of pruning. Some of that pruning will be done by the reality of finances, some of that will come through what the storms shake out, and some of it will need to be done by the artful cutting we arborists in the Lord's orchard have been called to do. In all of it, there is no question that the Holy Spirit is massively reshaping what this tree looks like.

The thing about pruning is that it is necessary to give life. Pruning isn't a matter of getting rid of the dead and bad stuff. "Every branch that *bears fruit* he prunes to make it bear more fruit." It's the fruit bearing branches need to be pruned in order to produce even more. Part of the question we will need to keep asking ourselves in the coming months and years is: what has borne fruit in the past, and where does energy need to be redirected to bear even more fruit in another part of the vine?

The temptation, of course, will be to anxiously try to fix it ourselves, either by getting out our own shears and cutting the thing we think needs to go, or by trying to find the perfect arborist. We need a priest who will do this. We need a program that will do that. We need the bishop to solve x, or we need to hire an expert to fix y. But the gospel reminds us, as ever, that we are not the arborist, we are not the vine, we are the branches. God the Father is the vine grower whose job is to prune. Jesus is the vine who nourishes with life, and we are the branches, whose job is to abide in the vine. As a new day dawns in the Episcopal Church in Minnesota, our first and most important job is to simply abide in Jesus. We do that Jesus by dwelling in scripture so that it shapes our whole imagination, by committing to daily prayer, by worshipping with our community week by week, by insisting on periods of rest and renewal, by seeing every new moment as an invitation to turn around, and begin again. If you care deeply for your church, if you have been called to lead in any way, there is nothing more important than abiding in Jesus by keeping those practices day in and day out, and by making our faith communities places where that is an almost singular focus. We will not bear fruit that is worth anything if we are not starting and staying there. "Because apart from me, you can do nothing."

And the thing about branches is that they are not fed by their own fruit. The fruit we produce is not for our own sustenance. That comes from Jesus. The fruit we produce is for the life of the world. So together, as we consider what God might be pruning, we do well to remember that it's not our job to save the church. If we start with the question of how to sustain the church, we will have already cut ourselves off from the vine, and we will surely be thrown out. If, on the other hand, we start with the question of how to join God in saving the world with love, then we will not only be sustained through the pruning, we will be stronger because of it. It's not our job is to join God in feeding the world. Our job is to join God in feeding a world marred by centuries of white supremacy with repentance, lament, and justice. Our job is to join God in feeding a world that has been rocked by a pandemic with hope in God's faithfulness. Our job is to join God in feeding a world that is rent by divisions all around, where violence is the first move, with the reconciliation, and love.

The image of Jesus on the cross, arms stretched out and giving himself away for the life of the world, is the image of God's very heart. If we are to be found faithful in this moment then it must be the image of the church as well arm stretched out giving ourselves away fully, for the life of the world.

And make no mistake, none of us are in this alone. Though our Minnesota branches come in every imaginable shape and size--from the great north woods to the beautiful rolling plains, from bustling urban centers to the smallest villages, from Minnesota's first people to our newest arrivals from all corners of the world--we are all rooted in the same vine. We are better together. Our diversity, our difference, even our disagreements, will help nourish and sustain us for the journey to come.

On June 13th, my family and I left our house in Omaha, and entered Minnesota around 8:00 in the evening as permanent residents. During April and May, when I was working as your bishop

elect from another place, it was so hard to be coming to love you so quickly and not be present with you. As we drove across the state line on that evening and headed toward Albert Lea, an enormous relief came washing over me. I was only just arriving, and I had come home. I was able to lay down my struggle to get here, and simply rest in the beauty of this place. That's what it feels like to abide. To lay down our struggle to force ourselves somewhere, and to simply allow ourselves to be at home. Instead of wrestling salvation for the church, we are invited to rest in Jesus, and allow Jesus' love to be rendered through everything we do.

So do not be afraid, dear ones. As our psalmist reminds us today, though the earth be moved, and the mountains topple to the depths of the sea, though it's waters rage and foam, though the pandemic rock us and then wear us out, though Jesus continues to be crucified in black, brown and indigenous bodies, though we might not know how we'll pay the insurance bill next month or when we'll be able to hug one another again, the Lord of hosts is with us. The God of Jacob is our stronghold. All across Minnesota this morning, Jesus reaches out to us, gathers us like a mother hen, looks us in the eye and reminds us that love wins, death has died, we are free. Abide in me, because apart from me you can do nothing. Amen.