Easter 5

May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8

I watched a video the other day as part of a continuing education class. The video was about bullying and was done, much to my surprise, by Burger King.

I shared the link in my weekly email and we’ll post it on Facebook, too. If you can, I encourage you to watch it.

In the video, a teenaged boy is bullied by other teenage boys, all played by actors. They’re sitting amongst actual customers. And those customers watch, mostly in silence, as one boy is taunted and harassed and pushed around by the others. Only 12% of those present stepped in.

But when cheeseburgers show up damaged, because an employee literally smashed his fist in them before wrapping them up, 95% of customers complained to the employees, some of them using language that had to be bleeped from the video.

Now, I don’t want to get into the why or how of bullying, because that’s beyond the scope of a sermon. But watching that video moved me, in part because it connected to something I read earlier in the week.

When one of us suffers, we all suffer, whether we know it or not.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The thing with watching someone be bullied, watching someone being harassed and humiliated and not doing something about, it is that it makes us a part of the problem. It gives the bully more power. And for the person being bullied, it amplifies the message that they’re not worthy of respect or dignity.

When Jesus speaks about being the vine, saying that God the Father is the vine grower and we’re the branches of the vine, he’s reminding us of the interconnectedness of all of creation. None of us are self-made, wholly independent of others. We rely on the things that other people have learned over the millennia about agriculture, weaving fabric, building adequate shelter, methods of safe travel, medicine, communication.

And Jesus is reminding us that no person is unimportant. The vine cannot thrive to its fullest potential if even one branch is unwell. Some of us thriving isn’t enough. Most of us thriving isn’t enough. *All* of need the chance to thrive.

One thing I can say with certainty is that when it comes to bullying, neither the person who is being bullied nor the bully themselves is thriving.

We recently hired a gardener. She spent an afternoon tending to the landscaping in front of our house.

I’m always hesitant about pruning. I get nervous that I’ll cut too much and kill the plant.

I watched in amazement she took her shears and cut back some of the plants with gusto. She filled 4 or 5 of those big Rubbermaid trash cans with the clippings.

About a week later, I saw blooms begin to appear on the azalea bushes.

She came back a couple weeks ago to check on the plants. By then, the azaleas were in full bloom. As she showed us how to properly water the plants, I watched as fat bumblebees hopped from plant to plant.

I realized that, because of her pruning, the plants were starting to thrive again. And then I realized that her pruning meant that the bumblebees had more flowers to visit, so the pruning benefitted them, too.

I’ll admit, though, that the notion of God pruning *us* is more than a little scary.

It’s a bit unnerving to read words like, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

Indeed, those words *have* been used many times to judge people, to try to scare people into conforming to a particular set of behaviors, for fear of being cast into hell.

But I think we should be careful whenever we’re tempted to take a passage from Scripture and point to others and say *they* need to be careful, *they* need to change their ways. Because that’s giving into the temptation to judge. And even though it’s something a lot of us feel like we’re pretty good at doing, isn’t ours to be doing, but God’s.

So if that’s not what Jesus was *actually* saying?

What if, instead of inviting images of eternal doom, instead of trying to give us more things to worry about, Jesus was actually pointing out that those who choose to turn their backs on God, those who choose to not abide in the love of the triune God, wither *because* of their desire to place their trust elsewhere?

What if, for example, instead of suggesting that God is going to prune the bullies from the world, cast them into eternal torment in hell — what if what God *actually* had in mind was to prune out of them the *desire* to be a bully, the *need* to humiliate another person, and the kind of thinking that says “I can only feel good about myself if I put another person down”?

What if God the vine grower is looking to prune out of each of us anything that doesn’t allow us to thrive, anything that keeps us from blossoming into the person God created us to be?

Well, that’s scary, too, isn’t it? Not because it comes with the fear of hell, but because it comes with it the fear of growth, and the fear of allowing ourselves to feel worthy and loved. The fear of being freed to become who we were created to be.

It is far easier to believe the bad things people want to say about us than to believe the good.

I have had to do a lot of work on that in my own life. I have had to learn how to do things like graciously accept compliments. To learn to say, “thank you,” when my instinct is to water down a compliment or brush it off.

As branches of the vine, it’s God’s love that prunes us, not God’s vengeance or anger. It is God’s love that allows us to thrive, to blossom.

If a few hours of pruning allowed my azaleas to bear more blossoms, to be more welcoming to some bumblebees, and bring me more joy when I look out my window, imagine what the power of God’s love can do for *us*.

It might just prune out of us our need to feel superior to someone else. Our insistence upon being right. Our fear of people who don’t think like us or look like us or worship like us.

Freed from all that keeps us from fully experiencing God’s love, we can thrive, and we can share that love with others, and we can do the work we promised to take on in our baptismal vows — to work for a world where *all* people can thrive.

Hear these words and take them into your hearts:

You are worthy. You are loved. You are enough. Give up what keeps you from bearing fruit and find the freedom to live into God’s love for you.

1. *Dearly Beloved*, Cara Wall [↑](#footnote-ref-1)