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“Pruning Our Lives”

During his upbringing Jesus obviously learned something about cultivating a garden and its cost. I say this, based on this reading from John’s gospel and other gospel references. Here using John’s gospel, particularly chapter 15, I would like to share some thoughts with you about the cultivation of our souls in the context of community living. I’ll talk about the “ground of our being” in the context of the garden in which we have been planted to live and work.

“I am the true vine, and 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 15:1-17

Jesus obviously learned something about cultivating a garden and its cost. I’m not talking about the cost to the gardener – the time and labor expended, which is real – but rather, the cost to the plants. I cannot imagine that there is anything more confusing and more contusing to a living plant than to be pruned. A plant, whose sole reason for being is to be alive and to grow... and then to be cut back. It must feel like death to a plant. And yet, every gardener will know that unless the plant is pruned back, the plant *may* grow, but it will likely grow wild and it will spend itself prematurely, missing its great potential to flower with form and beauty, season after season. Gardens need to be cultivated and plants need to be pruned back to bring forth the best of what they’ve been created to be.

It seems to me that life prunes us, whether or not we consent to it. Some of this comes in the form of disappointments: what we *could* have had or feel we *should* have had, but don’t... because we *weren’t* chosen for something; because we *were* chosen for something; because we grew up on the wrong side of the tracks; because we were let go (let go of a job; let go by a friend...). Changes in our health, the experience of growing older and seeing our energies dwine, the experience of losing the loves of our life, the experience of simply not being able to have it all, and ultimately the anticipating of our own death and of dying. I would call these experiences some of the “pruning” that mortal life simply brings to us all, whether or not we choose it. But Jesus, here in John’s gospel, is saying to choose it. Choose to abide, which in itself is a kind of pruning from the delusion that what the Master Card people say is true: “You can have it all.” You cannot. It’s a snare and delusion to think that life offers us limitless options. It does not, and it’s not supposed to. To abide, as Jesus here speaks, is to be rooted and grounded in the love of God, Jesus being the vine, as he says, and we the various branches that will bear the tough love of being pruned.

♣ With regards to this metaphor of pruning, is there something you’re aware of now that would be helpful to be pruned? Something perhaps you carry as “baggage” in your soul that would be helpful for you to part with. (Not long ago one of my brothers in the monastery and I were talking about something. I said to him, “I guess I’ve got some baggage around that.” My brother responded, “Curtis, that’s not baggage, that’s freight!”) It may have to do with forgiveness – forgiving yourself or allowing yourself to be forgiven for not yet being perfect in ways which you well know. It may have to do with an expectation, a plan, a goal, a presumption about something which you clearly see isn’t going to be realized, isn’t going to happen... and to

hang onto this could unwittingly cultivate the poison of resentment or anger in the ground of your being. Needs to be pruned. It might have to do with something you believed, thought you believed, and you're not so sure of it now. Better to travel lighter. Is there some kind of pruning back of what once was alive in you but – for whatever reason – is no longer. The pruning, risky as it may sound, may be the only way for the budding of new growth to come. There's that endearing word of insight in the Talmud that reads, "Every blade of grass has its angel that bends over it and whispers, 'Grow, grow.'" How can you co-operate with your soul's will to grow? Is there something that needs to be pruned, and in this you co-operate with God. Florida Scott Maxwell writes, "I often want to say to people, 'You have such nice neat plans about what life ought to give you, but you won't get it. Life does not accommodate you, life shatters you and it's supposed to, and it couldn't do it better.'" We hear this very thing in the Gospel appointed for today: "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it shall not bear fruit."

♣ There's a word "perfect" that appears in the gospels. It means to be whole or complete. Jesus says, "be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect." To my ears, the word "perfect" makes more sense as a verb: to perfect.ⁱⁱ To perfect implies a process or cultivation or conversion over time. To perfect one's life one presumably starts with one's imperfections, which, I think, is how God attracts our attention. Jean-Pierre de Caussade, the eighteenth-century French spiritual director, writes, "Rejoice every time you discover a new imperfection." De Caussade counsels, if you find yourself getting impatient, try to bear your impatience patiently. If you lose your tranquility, endure that loss tranquilly. If you get angry, don't get angry with yourself for getting angry. If you are not content, try to be content with your discontent. "Don't fuss too much about yourself," de Caussade says. "Don't fight the truth of yourself," he says. The self "comes clean," he says, when it is most exposed, most vulnerable to its own imperfection. He says, "the time will come when the sight of your imperfection and brokenness, which may horrify you now, will fill you with joy and keep you in a delightful peace.... The fruit of grace must, for the moment, remain hidden, buried as it were in the abyss of your imperfection, underneath the most lively awareness of your weakness."ⁱⁱⁱ In Christ, strength is made perfect in weakness.^{iv}

♣ With regards to co-operating with the cultivation of growth in your soul, what do you need for this next season of your life? If we draw our insight from the world of plant nature, what, for you, are the equivalents of sunshine, water and fertilizer that are the quintessential elements needed to sustain your life and promote growth? Some of this might have to do with time, time you need. Is your work – your work in the hospital or in education, or in a parish, or in industry or technology or in the marketplace – consuming *so* much of your being that your life is being strangled like by weeds? Do you need to "get a life"? What is it that would help in terms of time? Less time for what? More time for what? Or maybe a different kind of time. There's a marvelous insight that comes from Buddhist spirituality. If you are exhausted or depleted, don't think that what you need (or what you only need) is rest. A Buddhist remedy for exhaustion or depletion is to "give yourself wholeheartedly to something." I think this alone may be the greatest source of exhaustion or depletion: of being duty-bound to do too much, and therefore to be spread too thin and thus to seldom be able to be fully present for matters which require a full presence, and so you end of trying to squeeze out of the part of you that is there what is fully required. It can leave you living out your life in a series of closets. Some of that may not change during your active work years, but I think we all need some contexts where we can be fully and wholeheartedly present, where we can have a taste of "abiding," as we hear Jesus speak in John's gospel. The invitation is to be really present to the real presence.

It may have to do with nourishment. For what are you hungry? (You may remember that old principle of biology called “homeostasis,” i.e., that we crave what we need.) Forget whether it’s rationale or even understandable (by you or others), ask yourself what your soul craves? This past Christmastide, after our celebrations at the monastery, I was *so* tired that I was almost catatonic. Many of you are probably well-acquainted with this kind of exhaustion in your own life and ministry. Here it was, December 26th, and I had a completely free day, and what I wanted to do more than anything else was to go to a “Home Depot” and just walk the aisles. I love working with my hands. I needed to get my hands on some construction stuff – wood, tools, gadgets. Things that work! I didn’t need to buy anything. I spent hours walking the aisles. Very therapeutic. What about for you? Is there something quite immediate that you crave to have or do? Is there something ongoing in your life, in this season of your life, that would be like light or water or nourishment for your soul? Do something? Eat something? See something? Hear something? Feel something? Read something? Play something? I think the principle of physics applies equally to the life of the soul: “nature abhors a vacuum”. Address your hungers or they *will* be addressed, perhaps in ways that are shocking and out of character with your true self.

If you find this kind of reflecting, collecting, I would encourage make note of it while you are here on retreat: how to co-operate with God’s work within your soul of pruning and cultivating so that you have the experience in your life, in this next season of your life, not *just* participating an endless, endless series of planning sessions and meetings and programs and liturgies, but the experience of abiding, of being there, of being really present. Less is more. Don’t be too ambitious with your resolves.

Much of what I’ve said here, I’m speaking to you as individuals, because I think that the cultivation of life – the conversion of life – begins in our own hearts, and it can make a world of difference. Mary Oliver, the great poet who lives down on Cape Cod (and who has become an Episcopalian!) writes:

To live in this world
 you must be able
 to do three things:
 to love what is mortal;
 to hold it
 against your bones knowing
 your own life depends on it;
 and, when the time comes to let it go,
 to let it go.^v

ⁱ Florida Scott Maxwell in *The Measure of My Days*.

ⁱⁱ Matthew 5:48; Luke 18:9-14; John 5:44; also Romans 10:3f; Galatians 3:10.

ⁱⁱⁱ Simon Tugwell in *Ways of Imperfection*, p. 213, quoting and citing Jean-Pierre de Caussade in *Lettres Spirituelles*, vol. 1 (Paris, 1962), pp. 96, 117.

^{iv} 2 Corinthians 12:9.

^v “In Blackwater Woods,” by Mary Oliver in *American Primitive*.