

“How the Best Has Come out in Us”

John 15:1–8

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I remember planning a vacation for the summer of 2020. We needed to move Ali to Ann Arbor and have time to see Ian and Brittany in Memphis. Academic calendars where they are doing doctoral work set the basic parameters for when we needed to go, but COVID-19 was a factor too. Not only were we concerned about COVID realities in the states through which we would travel — including mundane yet essential matters like where we could find gas, food and restrooms — I was concerned about when we might have our first in-person worship service. Yes... in the spring of 2020, I thought we might be able to gather in the summer of 2020 and didn't want to be absent when we did.

Well, this pandemic has lasted longer than any of us anticipated, and there may still be challenges ahead. It is wonderful to be together again, but parts of our nation and world are not doing as well as we are. Variants are a challenge. During the pandemic of 1918–1920, our church ceased services for several months and then resumed them only to have to cease them again a year later. May we not repeat that pattern! It has been a difficult enough fourteen months already with the spread of disease; the loss of jobs and income; the isolation from one another; the burdens put on healthcare workers and educators, families with school-aged children and single people alike. It has been a brutal year.

And yet, as I have said many times, it has also been a year when the best has come out in our church. You have demonstrated incredible patience, flexibility and resilience. You have cared for each other in creative ways, supported the church and encouraged the staff. You have found ways of reaching out to people in need and stood up for justice. Unlike the vast majority of church staffs I know, our staff has never felt pressure to do anything unsafe. To paraphrase Charles Dickens, it may have been the worst of years in many ways, but it has been the best of years for our church in other ways. The best has come out in us.

Why has this happened? How have we been able to respond in this way? I'd like to frame my answer in the context of the metaphor Jesus develops in the reading from John 15. Jesus says God is the vinegrower, he is the true vine and we are the branches. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit unless it abides in the vine, neither can we bear fruit unless we abide in him. If we are cut off from the source of our nourishment, we will wither and die, eventually even in normal times but quickly in a time of hardship. But if we abide in him, we will be so deeply connected to the source of our greatest needs that we will be able to bear fruit, endure hardship until a better day arrives.

That's what I have seen in our church — people who have remained so intimately connected to Christ that we have been able to get through this time, we have been able to bear the fruit of kindness, compassion, patience, mercy and love. But, of course, we are not the first followers of Jesus to encounter difficulty or discover the truthfulness of his words.

Edith Stein was a brilliant Jewish philosopher who converted to Christianity in 1922. As she studied the work of Thomas Aquinas, she came to believe that “the deeper one is drawn into God, the more one needs to go out of oneself — out into the world, that is, to carry the divine life into it (*Edith Stein*, p. 41).” She followed this vision and lived a demanding life of prayer, academic work and service to the poor.

In 1933 she entered an order of Carmelite nuns and became Sister Teresa Benedicta of the Cross, but she never left her Jewish heritage completely, she identified with the suffering of Jewish people, and she was eventually arrested by the Gestapo, along with many other baptized Catholics of Jewish heritage, and put to death at Auschwitz.

People who were with her in the holding area in Westerbork in northern Holland said she always had a conspicuous sense of peace radiating from her, even though she knew they were awaiting transport to a death camp. She was always calm and often tended to frightened children. When people marveled at her disposition, she observed, “in the end... there will only be the fullness of love. How could it be otherwise (*Edith Stein*, p. 107–108)?” Edith Stein lived in the midst of something as horrific as a pandemic. She lost her life to the Holocaust, but not her faith, because she was so deeply connected to Christ.

The question is as to how we develop and maintain this kind of connection, how we abide in Christ. There are many ways, including a long list of personal devotional habits — prayer and meditation, the reading of scripture, *lectio divina*, journaling, walking the labyrinth. There are also paths of service that deepen our connection to Christ — visiting the sick and bereaved, working in the clothing ministry, helping out with Family Promise or a Habitat build. A balance of the inner life and the outer life, as Edith Stein learned, is helpful. And shared times of worship like this center us in Christ too, now that we can return to them.

But the key is that we long to be intimately connected to Christ. Thomas Merton said that the desire to please God in and of itself pleases God. In like manner, a genuine longing to abide in Christ is all we need to abide because Christ holds on to us as firmly as we hold on to Christ.

But there is another insight of the metaphor Jesus develops in John 15 that might speak to our condition over the past fourteen months. Jesus speaks not only of the wisdom of abiding in him, but of the value of pruning the branches, cutting back in order to stimulate growth.

Sometimes we cut back on something intentionally so that we can focus on something else — work less so that we can spend more time with family, engage in fewer activities so that we can be fully present in the ones we keep. Other times some pruning is forced upon us, like during this pandemic. We have been forced to go without many things — going to restaurants and movies, concerts and sporting events, even church! And we will be delighted to resume many of these activities, but some perhaps we are learning we can do without, and in the process, find time for other things we value more — like prayer, reading and talking to each other. Pruning, whether chosen or not, facilitates growth.

When Henri Nouwen left his prestigious faculty position at Harvard Divinity School to work with profoundly handicapped people at L'Arche community in Toronto, it was a kind of pruning experience, and very disorienting at first. The residents neither knew nor cared about Nouwen's accomplishments. He was simply their friend, the one who helped feed and dress them. Nouwen had to reexamine his assumptions about his vocation and what it meant to be fruitful.

But ultimately it was transforming, as he realized his calling to a life not dominated by the desire to be relevant or important, but instead safely anchored in an awareness of God's love. "Christian leaders," he declared, "cannot simply be persons who have well-informed opinions about the burning issues of our time. Their leadership must be rooted in the permanent, intimate relationship with the incarnate Word, Jesus... For Christian leadership to be truly fruitful... a movement from the moral to the mystical is required (*In the Name of Jesus*, pp. 28, 31-32)."

To be clear, Nouwen was not denying our calling to social action. He was saying that all such action, indeed, the whole of our lives, needs to be rooted in our relationship with Christ. But he learned this lesson, he was reminded of what mattered most, because of some pruning that was forced upon him because of a change in work.

What have we learned from the pruning forced upon us this year? Perhaps something about what really matters about the church — the people who make up the body of Christ. Perhaps something about the value of worship — the ability to sing and pray together. Perhaps something about our flexibility — even in a church that is 209 years old, we can adapt, we can do without some things we thought we had to have (like in-person committee meetings!). Perhaps something about the world around us, its utter beauty and its need for healing — when we have more time to follow what is happening in the world around us and reflect upon the suffering of others, something within us changes, we are ready to engage important struggles for justice.

Jesus says that every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit. Thus, we give thanks, not for the pandemic, but for the pruning it has made possible, pruning that has enabled the best to come out in us.

How has the best come out in us? We have abided in Christ and allowed God to do a little pruning. May we continue these habits, ever trusting that they will enable us to bear fruit — not the kind that can be measured by secular standards, but the kind that matters, the fruit of love and kindness, justice and peace.