

“Pruning our Resume”

Sermon on Sunday, April 7, 2019

Based on Philippians 3: 4-14

Last Wednesday, at our midweek prayer service, I spoke about the spiritual practice of pruning, taking a page from Jesus’ thoughts in John 15 where he compares his followers to the branches on a vine. “I am the vine,” he says, “you are the branches; if you abide in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.” In the metaphor he talks about God eliminating the dead branches on the vine and even clipping those that have produced in order to keep the plant fruitful. “He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit,” Jesus continued, “while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it will be even more fruitful.” That led me to reflect on our need to do some pruning in our lives in the form of ridding ourselves of excess material, all the stuff that we accumulate in the course of our lives, all the things that sit around in our garages and attics, the boxes that were never opened from the last move because what’s in it isn’t really all that essential, the objects that sometimes tend to rule our lives because they take up space in our homes. I recalled talking to my neighbor Vince who is moving out of his home this month and his comments. “If I can give you one advice,” he said, “get rid of your stuff early.” It’s a pretty common phenomenon in our neighborhoods. People constantly complain about “too much stuff.”

This season of Lent we have challenged ourselves to live a bit simpler, to prune our material-intake, so that we may be healthier and may live in a healthier world. Lisa in the church office has come up with some impressive statistics every week, showing us how people are producing and consuming often thoughtlessly, making a mess on the big scale of this world, leaving billions of tons of plastic waste for future generations to deal with. Are we not living in a world that needs some pruning? And will the pruning not also have positive spiritual effects on us, how we feel about ourselves, how we lead our lives? Will it not have a liberation effect on the deepest levels of humanity’s soul?

Today, I would like to expand on that meditation with the help of the Epistle text for this Sunday, coming from Paul’s letter to the Philippians. The pruning goes one step further in this passage. Let me explain... Of all the leadership figures that we meet in the New Testament, Paul was probably the most accomplished person. He had a quite a resume to show. Paul had grown up in the small Greek diaspora city of Tarsus. He was at least bi-lingual, speaking Aramaic and Greek fluently. He came from a prestigious Jewish family, had completed studies and degrees and became an expert in Jewish law. He was smart. He was ambitious. He could win arguments. He had made his family proud. It would probably not be wrong to compare his academic accomplishments to a PHD in today’s terms. And now he writes to his church in Philippi that he considered all of the accomplishments of his life, the privileges he had acquired and the resume that he assembled as... rubbish, (that’s the word he uses) as worthless bragging rights that no longer meant a whole lot to him. Instead, he says, “what I am really about, at this stage of my life, is to make a real difference in the world in the name and in the power of Christ who has captured my heart and continues to inspire me!” In other words, Paul was pruning his own resume and he cut through all the clutter and said, “This is what is really important to me. Being aligned with the difference maker, Jesus, the Christ, and doing things that matter!”

Picture a big-wig PHD doctor with lots of framed documents on the wall. The PHD from Harvard: rubbish; the graduate program from the University of Pennsylvania: worthless; the leadership awards: not that important anymore. The money: not as valuable as it used to be. How many of

those awards can you take with you? That's where Paul is and that's where he is coming from, spiritually speaking. He is radically pruning his resume.

Of course, we have to remember that this man was probably in his early 50's when he wrote this. It is estimated that he was born in the year 3 A.D. and that most of his letters were written in the sixth decade of that first century. Which makes a lot of sense! He was in the second half of his life, a time when many of us start taking another look at our accomplishments and wonder, "Was that all? Could there be more?" For the young people among us, building a resume is extremely important. You have to prove your worth, to yourself in a sense and then also to the people who you need to convince to employ you. You choose your college as if your life depended on it. You tell yourself that your life really depends on it, and you stress over it, that's part of being young, and it's mostly good. With the distance of age and the advantage of perspective, however, you don't stress quite as much. That's where Paul is. He says, "I don't care about my impressive resume anymore, the certificates on the wall, the titles, the accolades, my impressive ancestry. It's not that important to me." He was in the second part of his life and had become a leader who put all his skills into building something that deeply mattered to him: communities of faith!

In recent years, Richard Rohr, one of the better known spiritual leaders of our time, wrote a book about the two halves of life. He wisely acknowledges that the building of our identity in worldly terms, our resume, our accomplishments, our production so to speak, is very important in the first half of life. It's how we are wired. But in the second half, quite often it does change. This is a statement from the introduction in his book: "Most of us think of the second half of life as largely about getting old, dealing with health issues, and letting go of our physical life, but the whole thesis of this book is exactly the opposite. What looks like falling can largely be experienced as falling upward and onward, into a broader and deeper world, where the soul has found its fullness, is finally connected to the whole and lives inside the big picture." In the words of Carl Gustav Jung, the famous Swiss psychologist, "we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning—for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie."

As I read this, as I pondered over Paul's passionate change at mid-life, I thought how blessed we are as a church to have multiple generations be present in our community, to have people in the second half of their lives provide some perspective and dedicating a good portion of their energy to work that deeply matters to them, often in the context of the church; and to have young people here who are still in the process of growing and building their resume; and to have all of us centered on the cross, on God's presence and our calling in this world. Is church not a beautiful opportunity of growing into the meaning of life together? My daughter asked me last night, "Pa, what is the most difficult part of your job?" And I had to think for a moment or two. But then I thought, it's not the funerals or the difficult conversations, the writing of sermons or the council meetings on Monday night. The most difficult aspect is that I see, in the larger society, people abandoning that kind of community and living in their own bubbles. I think people often don't quite realize what an opportunity and what a blessing houses of worship can be in the midst of the community. Paul was working on building communities and houses of worship modeled in the Jesus way. And he was the happiest person for it. No matter what your resume is in the world, you will be blessed to work on such a community and you will be transformed as a person in the process. For God needs all generations to work together for us and for our world to be whole.

Amen.