

John 15:1-11
Pruning the Vine
St. Mary the Virgin
May 14, 2023
Easter VI
Peter R. Powell

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. **2** He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. **3** You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. **4** Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. **5** I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can't do anything. **6** If you don't remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. **7** If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. **8** My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples. **9** "As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father's commandments and remain in his love. **11** I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. (CEB)

Today's Gospel reading is a passage that can be the proof text for much mischief. It seems to me that in the history of the church, texts like this that talk about pruning, are frequently used to justify deciding who is and who is not a Christian. I am walking that fine line and it is a cautionary note for this sermon.

The issue scholars believe this text addresses sounds esoteric. The analogy in this morning's Gospel passage deals with the issue of Docetism.¹ Heady stuff for a theological discussion in May. You might reasonably ask what is Docetism and why should I care?

So, my task this late morning is to convince you that Docetism and the point of this loaded pericope have a bearing on how we lead our lives as Christians in the 21st Century. First the definition of Docetism so you won't google it while I preach. Docetics believed that Jesus only appeared to die. They found it logically impossible that God could or would die therefore if Jesus was divine, he didn't die. The problem with believing that Jesus didn't really die is that it means he was not fully human and therefore does not and did not fully understand our human condition. One of the foundational thoughts of Christianity is that Jesus was fully human, while also being fully divine. He died on Good Friday and Rose on Easter.²

¹ Fernando Segovia, "The Theology and Provenance of John 15:1-17.f", *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, 101/1 (1982), pp. 115-128.

² I frequently say that the sine qua non of Christianity is the acceptance of the crucifixion and resurrection. One can be a good Unitarian and not accept this act but Christianity is defined by it.

I imagine that most of us have gotten along with our lives quite well without ever focusing on the question of whether Jesus really died or not. Is it a real question for anyone listening to this sermon? Whoever wrote this passage on the vine and vineyard and the pruning of the vine appears to have thought quite a lot about what happens when some members of the church believe something in contradiction to what he, and now we, hold true. It would be anachronistic to talk about orthodoxy in the 1st century. Theology was just developing. But it appears from the entirety of John's gospel that there was a struggle about what the proper response to the crucifixion and resurrection would and should be. Judgment was quite harsh. Either get it right or burn in hell. If you when you get home read this passage, you'll see that this is the stark choice. Get it right or burn in hell.

One of the most troubling conflicts today revolves around the question of who is and who isn't Christian³? It's not a conflict in TEC. But it is a conflict in the culture.

How does it manifest itself? Well, in one state legislature the issue is, do Christians necessarily revere the bible, for instance, as a holy book, and revere it so much that putting it in a refrigerator desecrates it? That's an issue in Arizona⁴! I don't see it as an important issue but some legislators do. I think not reading it and not following its content desecrates it. But some see it as a cult object rather than God's directions on how to live in God's creation.

Most if not all of us would be uncomfortable today with the clarity in today's Gospel. No pruning branches to bear more fruit, no burning the defective, we, in TEC, have moved on from that kind of clarity and condemn it when it pops up in the talk and actions of some of our more conservative Christian brethren. We are tolerant. We believe in a society of many different trends each equally good. We don't want to be put on the spot so we don't put others on the spot. The clarity behind this gospel ought to make us uncomfortable. It does not recognize life in a pluralistic society.

Today's Gospel has nothing to say about pluralism, however. It is not concerned with the relationship of a 1st Century believer to the Roman Empire or even to Judaism. It is concerned exclusively with the relationship of the believer to other believers and it says that there are some things which must be upheld.

We are in a similar time.

For instance, there are some Christians who believe that States' Rights forbid the Supreme Court to change the definition of marriage to be other than between a man and a woman. They ground this in the bible, which is at best problematic and certainly can't be argued from the Old Testament, where polygamy is normative. Even in the NT the idea of marriage is problematic from our standpoint. The modern idea of marriage is only faintly argued in the New Testament. For instance, a Bishop, we read in 1 Timothy, must be the husband of no more than one wife⁵, which seems to mean that others could have more than one wife? In other words, those arguing the biblical mandate for traditional marriage are saying that marriage has for millennia, and they actually use the

³ I you wish to learn more about how mainline/ecumenical Christianity and so-called Evangelical Christianity split so dramatically I recommend David A. Hollinger's book: *Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular*. Princeton University Press, 2022. It's very readable and relatively short at 199 pages.

⁴<https://www.npr.org/2023/05/09/1174884800/arizona-house-bible-biblegate-democrat-minister-ethics-investigation-gop>

⁵ 1 Tim 3:2. The text may also be translated married only once.

term millennia, been a settled argument; that is, one man and one woman. Sorry, not so. It is issues like these that define heresy in our world. Some argue for traditional marriage citing the threat calling a relationship between same gendered people marriage would pose. I suggest that there are many challenges for any marriage, but letting same sex people marry is not conceivably a threat. Indeed, the example of anyone living faithfully with another is a witness to the gifts of marriage for all of us.

You may wonder if this is a live question in TEC today? It is. Two years ago, I learned that the church where I was rector from 1979 to 1985⁶ has left the Episcopal Church over the issues of Gay Marriage and the ordination of women. When I was Rector, it was a liberal parish in the Diocese of Washington. Today it is no longer an Episcopal Church. After a quarter century of arguing the Diocese let it go⁷.

There are those Christians who argue, to choose another issue, that white privilege must be maintained. This reminds me of the New Yorker cartoon showing Jesus and Buddha sitting on a cloud. Buddha says to Jesus, “do you know what I regret the most? Letting them depict me as a jolly fat man.” Jesus responds that his “deepest regret is letting them depict me as a white man.” He was not. On a more serious note, the controversy around Tucker Carlson is centered on white privilege.⁸ White privilege is all about power. White privilege is apparently defined by a way to fight and does not include fighting dirty. It also does not seem to include compassion for those the bible cares the most about, the poor, the vulnerable, the widows and orphans in the biblical context and the persecuted, the homeless, the refugee and all who are harmed by our system, in our context.

There are those Christians who argue, to choose yet another issue, that welfare promotes laziness and dependency when studies clearly show it does not. Those in favor of eliminating welfare, and it is only a pale shadow of what it once was and should be, believe the greatest motivation to work is poverty without realizing that for many if not most of the poor and those on welfare, the burdens and reality of racism they face, their mental illness, the presence of young children, etc. keep them from working, not their lack of initiative. Those who oppose the call for cash subsidies to families with children likewise believe that doing so will cause people to leave the workforce. They can cite no studies supporting this. However, the State of Iowa⁹ recently passed welfare restrictions requiring more work from those on Food Stamps and the Republican negotiating position for the debt ceiling calls for more restrictions on those receiving any form of public assistance. They fail to recognize that people like me, white, male, straight and educated succeeded because we chose our parents well. That of course is an absurd statement.

There are those Christians who argue, to choose yet another issue, that justice is blind. Recent events should show those with eyes to see that this is not the case. Capital punishment for instance not only costs the State more than life imprisonment¹⁰ but it falls mostly on people of color. White people who can afford decent representation are rarely executed. Poor people who cannot are executed, especially poor people of color.

⁶ Christ Church, Accokeek, MD

⁷ The move to leave the diocese didn't begin until some years after I left. The move to become a conservative church began a couple of years after I left and caused my successor to retire early.

⁸ <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/07/opinion/tucker-carlson-christian-right.html>

⁹ <https://www.washingtonpost.com/dc-md-va/2023/04/16/iowa-snap-restrictions-food-stamps/>

¹⁰ <https://deathpenaltyinfo.org/policy-issues/costs>

We aren't concerned with Docetism today; the fault lines in faith today are not about whether Jesus died or not. Many Christians who behave badly accept the reality of the crucifixion; they don't accept its implications. The fault lines in Christianity today are figuring out the implications of following the resurrected Christ.

To put it another way, as Richard Rohr does, Jesus never commands us to Worship him, he directs us to Follow him. Many Christians worship but don't follow¹¹.

I imagine that if we take the Gospel seriously then the pruning today would be of those who fail to work actively, persistently and deliberately to end the injustices in our so-called Christian nation. For instance, should we take Matt 25 seriously and feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, clothe the naked, visit the sick and those in prison or should we pervert the Gospel to say that we feed the worthy hungry, give drink to the deserving thirsty, clothe the industrious naked, visit those who are sick for reasons not related to personal choice and visit the imprisoned who are there for some worthy reason, whatever that might be?

If we take today's Gospel seriously, it is saying that the implications of leading a faithless life, no matter how religious we are, will lead to our being pruned away and cast onto the fire. It is a harsh Gospel calling us to pay attention to how we actually lead our lives now while there is time.

If, as we believe, Jesus was fully human and fully divine and really died and was resurrected then what difference does that make in how we treat each other? The difference should be profound and should be obvious in the way we care about the things God cares about and I guarantee God does not support our restricting our definition of Marriage, our efforts to preserve White Privilege, our fear that we're making the poor dependent and the existence of Justice is Blind only as a slogan. God cares for those who suffer and we become the productive Vine of today's Gospel when we do too.

The Gospel does not call us to be NICE. It calls us to make this world, as we say in the Lord's Prayer, like heaven. We have a lot of work to do.

¹¹ For instance, see: <http://www.treeoflifepalmer.com/2018/08/01/followme/>