

Last week it was finally warm enough to get out into my garden. I couldn't help wanting to make a tour of the place and see what things are coming up, and where there are buds about to pop open and become flowers and new branches for the new spring of the year. The quince bushes are ready to put forth their lovely pink blossoms. The forsythia is well on its way with blooms and green sprouts, the little red maple has little red buds that are just about to open up.

So, then I went to examine the butterfly bushes that I planted last summer. I love the smell of their blossoms all summer long and the way they attract so many butterflies. But I was sorry to see that they didn't have any buds on them at all. Oh my gosh! Did I waste all that money and time watering and fertilizing them last year only to have them die over the winter? There were really no signs of life in the branches of the bushes. Then I bent over one of the little branches. In my experience a dead branch has no sap in it and it breaks off pretty easily. But these branches were pliable. They bent over under my touch and did not break. Hmmm. Maybe they are alive, but just have a different schedule for their springtime awakening.

The sign of life in the branches is that they are still flexible. BTW, anyone who has more experience than I with butterfly bushes please see me after the service!

And I thought of today's Gospel reading as I was standing there in front of the butterfly bush. Part of our passage today sounds very judgmental: "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." It seems to be saying that if you don't believe in Jesus then you are thrown away. But consider who Jesus is talking to and what is the circumstance.

This is the part of the Gospel of John called the farewell discourse. Over the course of three chapters Jesus prepares the disciples, and all of us who are followers of Jesus, for a life in which the Spirit will be, and is with us, but not the human person of Jesus. He is getting ready to say goodbye. We say that very word every day to everyone. And we forget that it's a 16<sup>th</sup> century shortening of the English phrase, God be with you.

So, Jesus saying goodbye (I will be with you) to his disciples, and is speaking to those who are already followers, and not to others outside the faith. When I went up to my forsythia bush after visiting the butterfly bush, I bent over a little branch that had no buds on it, and sure enough, it just snapped off. There was no sap in it, no life force. So, when Jesus says "apart from me you can do nothing," he is only cautioning us, his own people, that he may be leaving this realm, this earthly sphere, but he is not leaving us, and we cannot leave him. If we have come to be the disciples of Jesus, and we continue to make that connection every day and every week to our Higher Power, then the sap will be in us too and we will continue to do God's will, today and every day.

The vinegrower, (in other editions of the Bible it is the vinedresser, or the Husbandman) is God. God is the person who takes care of the vineyard and nurtures the vines. We may feel God is pruning us – taking away the parts of us that are no longer bearing fruit, but the text is also reassuring. We have **already** been pruned, or cleansed. Because we have chosen to abide in Jesus and he in us we have already shed those things which are not good for us, healthy for us, or don't put forward our love of others.

And yet, as we all know, our bad habits have a tendency to creep back in. And we think about our own selves and the behaviors and faults that we still have. But this passage is not primarily addressed to you and me as individuals. Jesus is speaking to his inner circle, his chosen men and women who have followed him on dusty roads, through the crowds of people, and in times of hunger, cold, and rejection (remember that they had to shake the dust off their sandals sometimes and just move on.) We are all branches on the one tree that functions together as a whole.

And that brings me to telling you that we have bowed out of the Living Local Joining God program of the ECCT (or the Diocese.) A representative called me from the Commons on Friday to tell me that he is "cutting us loose" from the program. I guess that's a nice metaphor for being pruned from the tree of that experimental initiative. It felt a little abrupt when he called.

And, at the same time there was a feeling of relief. Rather than looking at it from the point of view of the ECCT, I thought about it from our own parish point of view. Our parish is not cut down and thrown into the fire. Quite the contrary. Our parishioners, Terri, ME, Taylor, Danielle and Randy worked to follow the directions given, but it was challenging, and taught us a lot, and was difficult to accomplish. The view from where I stand is that of the many many things that we work on here at our parish, that is one that was a bit fraught, and with that pruned away from our healthy tree here in Lime Rock, the rest of our ministry and life together can thrive.

Jesus is addressing his people, his community, his brothers and sisters. He doesn't want them to fly apart into individualism after he leaves this earth. He doesn't want them our us trying to be our own tree existing all by ourselves and for ourselves. He wants us to see ourselves as branches together from a same vine, and existing together, and for each other, and with each other, and reaching out to someone who is the "other" to bring them in, graft them on to the vine. And that feels just the right metaphor as I sat with people of our community who came together for the Misa last night. Christine's canciones, Padre Juan's sermon about uvas, and the children laughing and playing reminds me that these people are gathering God's strength, in part, by participating in the tree of Trinity Church.

Yesterday, two of our parishioners got together to help a third parishioner. Each needed something to complete the triad; a car, a need of help and companionship, a desire for service, and all brought together by a couple of loads of laundry needing to be done. A fourth parishioner, Rachel, who started our Parish Helpers program also was part of this branch of Trinity, and fed by the same sap from this Trinity Tree. This is EXACTLY what Jesus wants from us as the branches.

All of us, you, me, the Hispanic congregation, the volunteers who did laundry (and do SO many other things around here) are the pliable branches of this tree. And we are fed by this meal here at the altar. We are fed by the Word of God, and by each other bringing God's living water that we first received in our baptism.

Thank you to all of the members of the Parish Guiding Team who did their best over this last year to try on the Living Local Joining God initiative. Now we can focus our life force, our energy, the sap that gives us the power to do God's will to head out into the thing God will give us next