

One of the things we learned very quickly when the pandemic began was just how necessary certain parts of our daily tending were to keep ourselves alive and thriving.

We learned how important the daily rhythms and routines are for the sake of our nourishing and well-being. How easily we can go astray from the things that make us feel alive, make us feel like the people we really are. Make us feel like the beloved creation we truly are. We've been so separated from many things which gives us life that we had to truly start from scratch, and even make new things from scratch too. Get enough rest. Eat enough food. Drink water, move your body, pray and read the Good News to feed your spirit. Call a friend. Check in with people. Deal with the annoyance of Zoom because chatting and seeing people in real time is actually worth it. Come back to your roots of faith, of love for yourself and your nearest and dearest people, and tend the fundamentals of what it is to be alive.

Our Gospel text today is a classic metaphor from Jesus, that he is the true vine, and we are the branches. From what I understand, growing fruit and vines or branches of any kind is similar to these new things we learned in the pandemic - you have to go through daily tending, daily actions of love and caring in order for anything to grow.

And friends, there is no better vine or branch or fruit to grow and tend than the fruit of being a disciple, of following Jesus.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches, connected with our Savior and Lord Jesus at our core, our root, our source of life, and tending these branches, this vine, is the act of discipleship, of following Jesus Christ. When we tend our branches in love, we bear good fruit. This good fruit is the action of faith, of loving God and loving neighbors, and doing what we can to serve our fellow beloved people and creation. But these actions of faith, these outcomes of good fruit, can only come through the daily tending of the vine. Daily we must lean on Jesus Christ for guidance, on God's love and action in the world, on the power of prayer made possible through the Holy Spirit. The daily tending of our faith in Jesus Christ allows us to then

act in the ways of love He commands us, bearing the good fruit of discipleship.

There are many ways that we can daily and lovingly tend to ourselves and our faith that glorify God. We think of the traditional, beautiful, strong daily practices of faith - prayer, scripture reading, devotion time, meditations, walks outside to encounter creation, among so many others. But lately when I think about daily tending to things in love, I am reminded of an essay by one of my favorite theologians and authors, Sarah Bessey - the essay is called "The Goodness of Making Things". She is an avid knitter, writer, and pray-er, and in the course of the essay, she argues that the actual act of creating something is subversive and life-giving in our current culture. We get to create and tend for the joy of it, after past generations were liberated from the necessity of making these items, and there is life to be found in the process of actually creating something, of having a craft or skill that requires tending. There is a love for the doing of the thing, the rows of knitting and crocheting stitches, the chopping of each ingredient for a homemade meal, the precision of cutting with a wood saw, the tinkering with auto engines, the watering of little green sprouts, all these things that we tend show love for our God who created them, ourselves as we engage this act of creation in love, and the people for whom we create. We encounter God, our creator, in the act of creation, which is a celebration of the world God made. God is the love that motivates this tending, and Jesus is the vine which connects and centers each of our branches, the root of our need for tending in love. Our daily practices of tending in love can look a lot of different ways - the important part is simply that we do the daily tending to our faith in our love of God.

Jesus, in our Gospel text today, assures us that He is the vine which needs tending in order for us to bear the good fruit of spreading the Good News and love of God throughout our lives. We need to actively, daily, tend to our faith in Jesus in order for the good fruit to grow and bless and nourish not only ourselves but others too. Faith is trust and hope in action, that God who is love will come through in our daily practices of nurturing our faith.

And though there is life-saving joy to be found in the tending of our faith, of our love for God in Christ Jesus, we must also cut away the parts of us that are not rooted in love. Jesus says, "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." With the help of God, we too must cut away the things we encounter that are not loving towards our neighbors or God. We must cut away exclusion, hatred, discrimination, judgment, blanket statements, and fear. And though it may seem scary to cut away the parts of ourselves that we've held onto for a long time, that served us at one point but perhaps do not anymore, we don't need to be afraid of the pruning. It is through the pruning that we put our faith in the resurrected God in action - that even after the cutting away, more, new, healthy fruit will grow in its place. Even after certain things die, new life rises forth, thanks be to God. Pruning and trusting the process of growing and tending is a living out of resurrection hope - that cutting away what has died will not be the end, but that something new and greater and more fruitful will instead grow in its place - new life comes forth from what has died.

In our readings today, we learn not only that God is love, but that the perfect love of God casts out fear. There is no fear in love, and we are able to love because God first loved us. Where we may hold fear for things that must be pruned away, God's love casts out the fear. The tending we do in love, the actions God calls us to, the acts of creation that celebrate life, these are the places where we find that deep and enduring love of God, which indeed does cast out our fear. Even the smallest acts of faith, the quickest prayers, the hurried meal created for your family, the shortest devotions or small step of growth and learning, these small acts together make up the larger result of good fruit being grown. These small acts are the ways we continue to abide in Jesus, just as he calls us to, and from this choice to abide in Jesus, to act in ways that draw us nearer to our God of love and life, we will absolutely bear good fruit into the world.

So friends, what can you daily tend in love in your life? What new creation can bring you closer to the love of God in Christ Jesus? What perhaps, with

God's help, needs to be pruned away in order for your vine to produce good fruit? I pray that you will be encouraged in your daily walk with Jesus, made human by our God of great and unending love, and that you find life to tend that in turn gives you new life in Christ Jesus too. Thanks be to God, Amen.