

“What Does it Mean to Get a Spiritual Haircut?”

*A sermon delivered by the Rev. Dr. Bill Steadman
at St. Andrew’s United Church, Sudbury*

May 3, 2015

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Acts 8:26-35 John 15:1-8

It is a simple story with a simple message. That is what can be said about stories of and by Jesus. A simple story with a simple message.

But we make it complicated. Think of a grapevine – and think of Jesus as the vine itself, and we are the branches that come from the vine.

Now the vine gives sustenance and strength and food and vitality, but the branches are the source of the grapes – they produce the fruit.

We would not know about the powerful nurturing presence of the vine if we had no branches, and certainly if we had no fruit produced. That’s the story today in John’s gospel.

And life in general also is like that – we all need to be nurtured and we all have ways that we are expected, even encouraged, dare I say ***need to produce fruit*** in our lives in order to be fulfilled.

The story for today is as simple as that.

Yet we complicate it, because it is a story about Jesus.

We ask such head-spinning questions as: “What is the ontological difference between the vine and the branches?”

“Can we be true branches of Jesus the vine, or have we been grafted onto the vine like some grape branches have been grafted onto a strong, older plant?”

See my point? Give us a simple tale that speaks about the direct ways that we are connected to the truth and teachings of Jesus, and we have a need to complicate it, make it more disjointed than it is and in the end actually diminish the power of the story.

“Diminish the story?” you might ask. How can that be? Well, I more and more am convinced that we use complicated language and elaborate phrases to speak about that which worries us or concerns us, *or* to speak about that for which we have little or no understanding. The complicated language and the big words try to hide our fears and our uncertainty.

Now talk about vines and vineyards brings echoes from the tradition of the Jewish scriptures, where the vine often is Israel, and God is the caregiver of the vines or vineyard.

Is this the imagery here?

I don't think so, for Jesus is the vine, not a nation, a people, or a whole religious tradition. There is a new beginning identified here, and a new understanding. He uses traditional language but gives it a whole new meaning.

In truth, the image is about the fact that we all need to be nourished – we cannot go it alone.

And sometimes we need to be like a vineyard, pruned even when we are doing well and flourishing.

I have heard that the most important pruning for the vineyard is the pruning that takes place in mid-season as the grapes are forming and the branches are strong and vital – the pruning must be to cut back the fresh, green, vibrant shoots that are emerging late in the season so that all of the sustenance of the vine goes to the creation of ripe, plump grapes. In late August or September we do not want a beautiful green vine, we want grapes, and to get the best crop we must prune some of the most vibrant and lush greenery on the vine.

Is life not like that? We need to always be examining where we are at and making shifts in our lives. The most significant shifts may happen when we are at our strongest, most vital, the “top of our game.”

In the midst of the political turmoil in the nation, someone recently, to my surprise as I would not see them as politically aligned with this individual, said that it is too bad Danny Williams left politics so early. To keep it politically neutral, the same may have been said in Newfoundland with Brian Tobin. Two leaders who came, made a splash, and just as quickly left the political scene.

It is a challenge in life. Sometimes we want to stay beyond our “best before” date. And sometimes we get into routines that are comforting and enjoyable that we simply do not want to change. And then change becomes difficult if not impossible.

I am always amazed how regularly Tim Horton’s and McDonalds renovate their restaurants. Usually before they seem really tired, they are closed and refurbished. And amazingly people do not stop going there because the restaurant colours have changed, colour of coffee cups been altered, or the menu diversified.

In our own lives, we need to find ways even when life is grand and going well to see what we need to trim and shape in order for even better, newer, stronger life to emerge.

Getting a spiritual haircut is not about cutting out all the bad things we experience or eliminate the sins we have done. That is easy. A spiritual haircut is realizing that to keep ourselves vibrant and alive we may need to trim some of the good we do so that we may do even more good elsewhere.

Just as healthy vines need to be trimmed to be healthy producers of fruit, we need to evaluate our personal call and mission in life to see where God wants me to be and what God wants me to do next.

Jesus says in the parable from John: “You already are in me – so you already are good, vibrant, worthwhile people.” The trimming may make us better, but in no way does it make us good. We already are good in Jesus’ eyes.

The more we worry about sin and death, the more we escape the true meaning of what Jesus tried to teach us. He came that we may have life – life in abundance.

In our memorial presentation today we remember the lives of those who made a difference to this congregation and people within it, and in turn people who responded to their gifts of life.

They were people of goodness whose goodness is remembered beyond their death.

May our goodness be remembered and honoured as we live lives of fullness on our earthly journey, for we know we are nourished by the presence and teachings of Jesus, who gives us strength.