

Pruning the branches
John 15:1-8, Easter 5, Year B
10 May 2009
By The Reverend Barkley Thompson

You were good enough to let me be away last Sunday, and during that time and for the surrounding eight days I attended the Credo conference conducted by the Episcopal Church Pension Fund. Attendees met at the Roslyn Center outside of Richmond for a week of focus on spiritual, vocational, physical, and financial health. Sounds riveting, doesn't it? I didn't really want to attend, but the conference is by invitation only, and I was afraid if I declined they'd never ask me back. So I went. I'm glad I did. As so often happens in our lives of faith, God meets and subtly teaches us in the most unlikely circumstances.

My Credo conference was for clergy age 39 and younger, from all over the country. There aren't a lot of us in the Episcopal Church, and it was striking—and affirming, and rejuvenating—to be in a room with thirty-one Generation X priests who share common cultural references. Throughout the week, participants modified and amplified our conversation with allusions to “The Breakfast Club” and “Ferris Bueller,” with quotes from Seinfeld and the early Simpsons, with pencil-tapped rhythms from Van Halen and Bon Jovi. Very quickly—much more so than is usually the case with people randomly and artificially cloistered together for a lengthy conference—we became comfortable with one another. By the second night we were staying up late, drinking wine (we're *Episcopal* priests, after all), and opening our lives one to the other. There was something unusual about it all, but at first I couldn't put my finger on just what.

We worshiped every day. The mid-week Holy Eucharist homily focused upon the same Gospel lesson we read today: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”

The first sentiment in this passage of Jesus isn't easy, but it makes clear sense all the same. A dead branch sucks nutrients from an otherwise healthy plant. Over time, the dead branch will stunt the plant. The dead branch must be removed if the plant is to flourish. This is true in gardening. As metaphor, it's true in organizations, and it's true in our individual lives. We know that our communion with God-in-Christ requires that we shed those parts of us—addiction, anger, self-centeredness, apathy—that sap our lives of faith and love. Such things must be allowed to die if we are to live. This is an admonition common in sermons and in prayers. It isn't earth-shaking.

Jesus' second sentiment, though, is: "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." What might this mean? If our lives are bearing fruit, then why would God seek to prune them? Why would God have us cut off that which is alive and well?

I remember a particular vine in the woods where I played as a child. It hung down from a tree and was a thick thing, with branches galore. One branch, though, curled around the vine itself. The branch was healthy. In fact, it was so healthy that over the years it grew to rival the main trunk itself. As it expanded, the branch the branch twisted ever more tightly around the vine until finally, with an irony even a kid could recognize, the branch slowly but surely choked its very source to death...

There are those parts of us that, originally, give us health and life. They are our vocations and passions, our convictions and commitments. They are the things we pursue to provide for our families. They are the things we do for others and the things we do to better our world. All are good. But over time, as any of these grows it may come to occupy so much of who we are that we begin to mistake the branch for the vine. We may come to *define ourselves* by the *branch*—I *am* Barkley Thompson, priest; or I *am* a traditionalist or a radical; or I *am* a Republican or a Democrat; take your pick—and when we do this even what had been the best and liveliest branch will surely choke us, taking over all else, most especially our source in the love of God. When the risk of this becomes acute, God may call us to prune even what *had been* good: to change our approach to work, to temper our passions, to loose our iron grip on some convictions, to reorient our lives more fully in Christ Jesus. *That's* an earth-shaking challenge.

Jesus goes on to say, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

Philip Yancey tells of a trip he took to Moscow during Russia's transition from Communism to something that more closely resembles democracy.¹ At every shop and stand he visited, Yancey found for sale Russian nesting dolls, those hollow, wooden, pear-shaped figures that open at the waist to reveal another smaller doll inside. The second doll opens to reveal a third, and so on until one reaches a solid doll at the center of them all.

The Russian nesting dolls Yancey found differed depending upon the shopkeeper's ideological point of view. A Communist might sell dolls that had Lenin or Marx at the solid center. A democrat's doll might be layered in reverse order, having Boris Yeltsin at its heart.

The thing about nesting dolls is that the outer layers—things of art and beauty—depend upon that core doll for their stability. Each outer layer is, on its own, thin, hollow and fragile, prone to cracking. It is the solid center that gives all the layers substance and strength.

¹ In a speech delivered at the summer 2008 Oxbridge Conference on the *Imago Dei* and the thought of C.S. Lewis.

This metaphor, too, holds for us. Just as the branches in our lives must extend from the God of love, so must God reside in the heart of us. God must be the solid center, or else the outer things that mark us—all those passions and pursuits—though perhaps beautiful, will be fragile and thin. They'll eventually crack if they don't rely upon God at the heart.

Yancey's image of the nesting dolls, along with the image of the vine and branches, filled my meditation at the Credo conference. In our striving to do good and Godly work, we priests (like all Christian people) are prone to be choked by the branches that define our lives. We are just as likely as anyone else to remove through our best intentions Christ from the core of us, leaving our lives and ministries thin and fragile. Especially these days, when *honestly*-held and *faithful* differences in opinion regarding liturgy, Sacraments, theology, human sexuality, and politics so mark the Church, it is easy for Christians of all kinds to wither and die under the weight of what we believe are our best convictions.

But somehow, blessedly, not at Credo. Things could have gone the other way. Among us were priests who represent every place along the political, theological, and ecclesiastical spectrum. Liberal priests and conservative priests; zealous social justice advocates and those who focus on personal, individual conversion. There were three gay clergy. There were clergy from different ethnic backgrounds. There were the tattooed and those whose hair is neatly parted.

All of these characteristics are important branches in our lives. They are indeed the layers of the nesting doll that make us who we are. But in the eight days spent together at Credo, under the care of good spiritual faculty and a present God, we rediscovered that the *center* and the life-giving *source* of each of us, and of us collectively as church, is Jesus Christ, who binds us *all* as branches to one vine no matter what other layers may accrue. The thirty-one of us opened our lives to one another, and in the midst of that discovery we found the Christ who lives at the center of each of us, and who serves as the vine from which we each receive life.

Only when the center and source is remembered do any of the other things matter. For *all of us*, our shared life in Christ Jesus—no matter what different branches we may follow—is more important than *any* branch on its own. Different though we may seem, sure though we may be in our pursuits, passionate though we may be in our varying convictions, it is the same Jesus from whom we all extend. It is the same Jesus who resides in the heart of each of us. When we fail to acknowledge this, God may put on his gardening hat. Because there's some pruning to do.

Amen.