

First your RISUS PASCHALIS, or Easter joke. Two priests went hunting, and they needed to ask for permission from the farmer who owned the land in order to do so. So the one priest said to the other – wait here by the car and I'll go and ask him. The farmer couldn't have been nicer, said sure they could hunt on his land, but he did have a special request. He had an old horse that was lame and needed to be put down, but he just didn't have the heart to do it. He asked the priest if he would do it for him. "Sure," the priest said.

Then he went to his colleague and decided to have a little fun. He said "This farmer was so mean, I'm going to go out back and shoot his horse!" So he goes around the barn and shoots the horse. Then he hears 2 shots ring out – he comes back to the car and asks the other priest what happened. "I figured I'd get him too – I shot 2 of his cows!"

First, a little background on this gospel text. This is another one of the 7 I AM statements of the gospel of John. Here Jesus uses metaphors of vine, vine grower and branches, focusing on the theme of what it means to be 'in relationship' at its deepest level. Jesus' instruction to His disciples is a timeless lesson – connection to Him and His Father is what sustains our every breath. But pruning is also a part of this relationships. In an agrarian society, these images were very familiar. But anyone of us who has driven by a vineyard after pruning immediately recognize it as well. Even on the scuppernong grapes!

Jesus makes it clear that He is the vine, God is the vine grower and the disciples – and us – are the branches that have already been pruned and are now supposed to bear much fruit. Jesus' words are encouraging, and He reminds us that we need to stay in relationship with Him if we wish to bear fruit. Our own efforts apart from Him will be fruitless. What we are about in this passage is nothing less than the transfer of God's own life through Jesus to us and then into the world. So being in relationship with God can be a transformative experience for all of creation. (adapted from CELEBRATION, 29 April 2018, p. 30-31)

Second, there is a tough warning in this passage: "He cuts off every branch in me that does not bear fruit." What does this mean? Deep in our heart we know what it means. There are some people in every group who just aren't interested in bearing fruit. Life is all about them and they take church like they take their grocery stores – on their own terms – and for the cheapest price. Here to serve their needs and they are not here to contribute anything – time, talent or treasure. They are usually the most critical as well.

If we have ever worked around fruit trees or grapevines we are familiar with the term 'sucker shoots.' Sucker shoots are branches that have no fruit but literally suck up the nutrients other branches need. Sucker shoots never bear fruit, but they greatly reduce the quantity and quality of fruit the other branches can bear. Every group has them, including the church. People who only take up space. It's great that we made our BAA – but with only 30% of the community participating, which is about the same percent as give to the offertory, it indicates that there are a lot of people who fall in this category here in our own parish. They are not really interested in bearing fruit. And even worse, there are always a few people who are actually poisonous to the group. There is a tree that grows in the Caribbean that can actually kill you. Eating its fruit brings painful suffering and sometimes death. Christopher Columbus encountered the tree and called it the Tree of Death. We don't want to have anything to do with the 'tree of death.'

There are poisonous personalities in every group, including the church. These people not only don't bear fruit. They actually do enormous harm to the work of the kingdom. They love to sow dissension. They delight in passing along rumors and innuendos. They think they are harmless and clever, and perhaps they think that they are defending God or the church or the truth. But they are actually enemies of God. We need

to use discernment around them. Make certain that we do not allow them to infect us. Be loving toward them, pray for them, treat them the way you would like to be treated. But understand that they are misguided in their mischief. God knows their heart. God knows the kind of fruit each of us is bearing or whether we are bearing any fruit at all. Now I'm not sure what being cut off means, and neither are scholars. Does it mean cut off from God's love? I can't believe that. Does it mean that they are shut off from God's resources? I don't think we are ever completely cut off from God. The problem is that we've turned God into such a Santa Claus figure that the words 'cut off' are probably not in our vocabulary. But they are here in Christ's teachings. We are dealing with God, who knows our hearts at their depths. Where is our fruit? (adapted from DYNAMIC PREACHING, April-June 2018, p. 29-30)

Third, the critical piece is there in that very Johannine word: REMAIN, which occurs 8 times in this brief text. "Whoever remains in me and I in them will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing..." We are also told that we need to REMAIN on the vine – connected to one another. The Church is never a solo journey – it's always a group outing, whether we like it or not. Jesus reminds us that a branch cannot bear fruit on its own. It has to be connected – to the vine and the other branches. How does this work? Robyn Cadwallander, in a book called THE ANCHORESS, tells the story of a young woman, Sarah, who chooses to shut herself off from the world and lives as an anchoress (like Julian of Norwich). It's not an easy life and she soon finds herself struggling with her choice. Her confessor is a young, inexperienced monk named Father Ranaulf. Their relationship isn't easy. Ranaulf is a shy man, of few words, and so Sarah is often frustrated with him, wanting him to say more, to be more empathic, and simply to be more present to her. They often argue, or, at least, Sarah tries to coax more words and sympathy out of Ranaulf. But whenever she does this he cuts short the visit and leaves.

One day, after a particularly frustrating meeting that leaves Ranaulf tongue-tied and Sarah in hot anger, Ranaulf is just about to close the shutter-window between them and leave, his normal response to tension, when something inside him stops him from leaving. He knows that he must offer Sarah something, but he has no words. And so, having nothing to say but feeling obliged to not leave, he simply sits there in silence. Paradoxically his mute helplessness achieves something that his words don't, a breakthrough. Sarah, for the first time, feels his concern and sympathy and he, for his part, finally feels present to her.

Here's how Cadwallander describes the scene: "He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. There was no more he could say, but he would not leave her alone with such bitterness. And so he remained on his stool, feeling the emptiness of the room around him, the failure of his learning, the words he had stacked up in his mind, page upon page, shelf upon shelf. He could not speak, but he could stay; he would do that. He began to silently pray, but did not know how to go on, what to ask for. He gave up, his breath slowed.

"The silence began as a small and frightened thing, perched on the ledge of his window, but as Ranaulf sat in stillness, it grew, very slowly, and filled up the parlor, wrapped itself around his neck and warmed his back, curled under his knees and around his feet, floated along the walls, tucked into the corners, nestled in the crevices of stone.....The silence slipped through the gaps under the curtain and into the cell beyond. A velvet thing, it seemed. It swelled and settled, gathering every space into itself. He did not stir; he lost all sense of time. All he knew was the woman, but an arm's length away in the dark, breathing. That was enough.

"When the candle in the parlor guttered, he stirred, looked into the darkness. 'God be with you, Sarah.' 'And with you, Father.' Her voice was lighter, more familiar."

That is to remain. Silence creates the space for it. There's a language beyond words. Sometimes when we feel powerless to speak words that are meaningful, when we have to back off into unknowing and helplessness, but remain in the situation, silence creates the space that's needed for a deeper happening to occur. But often, initially, that silence is uneasy. It begins 'as a small frightened thing' and only slowly grows into the kind of warmth that dissolves tension.

There are many times when we have no helpful words to speak. We've all had the experience of standing by the bedside of someone who is dying, of being at a funeral or wake, of sitting across from someone who is dealing with a broken heart, or of reaching a stalemate in trying to talk through a tension in a relationship, and finding ourselves tongue-tied, with no words to offer, finally reduced to silence, knowing that anything we say might aggravate the pain. In that helplessness, muted by circumstance, we learn something: We don't need to say anything; we only need to be there, to remain. Our silent, helpless presence is what's needed – by the other person – and by us. For it contains the power of God within it.

I remember once as a young priest, full of seminary learning and anxious to share that learning, sitting across from someone whose heart had been broken, searching through answers and insights in my head, coming up empty, and finally confessing, by way of apology, my helplessness to the person across from me. Her response surprised me and taught me something I didn't know before. She said simply: "Your helplessness is the most precious gift you could share with me right now. Thanks for that. Nobody expects you to have a magic wand to cure their troubles." Remaining connected to one another and to God allows the healing power of God to flow, and good fruit to be born. Amen. (this adapted from Rolheiser, posting of 4/20/2018)