

Deuteronomy 5:32-6:9

Psalm 119:25-40

Hebrews 12:3-15

John 15:1-11

Sermon February 2nd, 2020

God Prunes Us so We Can Love as God Loves Us

Today we have chosen to celebrate our winter season with our liturgy “Of Lands and Seasons”. On Ground Hog Day to be exact. With the hopes that this can be both a celebration of winter and also a hearty goodbye with spring coming early. Why am I so optimistic you may ask? Well, the last couple of weeks have felt like Spring is already here. Trust me I am not that naïve about our Canadian winters.

So, putting spring aside for now, today we have chosen to celebrate our winter season. A season that seems to dominate the time in the year in Canada. A season that carries with it not only cold, ice, and snow, but also a variety of metaphors and spiritual meanings that enrich our lives.

When I went on the trusty google to look up some meanings of winter I came across these. Winter is the passing of time and age. Winter is a time of renewal and self-reflection. Winter is a time of new beginnings.

I reflect on these meanings, and think of how winter blankets creation. Giving life a chance to rest and be renewed beneath the snow and ice. Waiting to resurface anew in spring.

Then I hear our gospel this morning, and the idea that God prunes us. Or the word for prune in Greek can also mean clean. So, God cleans us. Or, if we stick to our winter theme, God gives us moments, winter in our lives, where we self-reflect. Where we experience rest and renewal. Where we have some intentional time to evaluate where we have been and where we are going.

In our own calendar year, we see that at the beginning of winter quickly comes the Christmas break. A time for us to rest. A time for us to be renewed. A time to self-reflect on how the past year went. A time to try new things or to experience new beginnings as we pen out our New Years resolutions.

In the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Canada every synod has a different time of year that they choose to host their annual Study Conference. A time for rostered leaders to get together. Self-reflect on how their ministry is going. Rest. Learn and grow. Support one another, and come away feeling renewed. I see this week as a retreat as much as it is a time for study. In fact, the Catholic church calls their annual gathering of rostered

leaders a retreat. Well, I like where our Synod has placed this Conference. Dab smack in the middle of winter. It fits perfectly with the spirituality themes of winter.

There are often several retreats offered across faith traditions every year for people of all walks of life to experience. Many of them are scheduled dab smack in the middle of winter. Connecting us to the spirituality of the winter season. Giving us time to self-reflect and experience renewal. If you have never attended one. I encourage you to go.

Confession and Forgiveness in our liturgical tradition is another opportunity within our faith to self-reflect and be renewed. We gather as a community to offer up our faults to God with the hopes that God will prune us, clean us, and guide us towards self-reflection. Leaving us feeling renewed to live our lives in faith. Giving us hope for new beginnings.

When we come to the communion table to receive the body and blood of our savior Jesus Christ we receive Christ's promise of forgiveness and renewal. We self-reflect either through meditation or through music before entering the line and then again after receiving this gift. We often come away from taking this gift feeling forgiven and renewed.

The spirituality of winter is so embraced in our every day practices of faith that like the physical aspect of winter that seems to last year-round in Canada so does the spiritual aspect of winter. Except I think we can tolerate the spiritual aspects more so then the physical ones.

As Jesus continues to elaborate on his metaphor of God pruning us. Jesus says this is so we can grow in relationship with God and with one another. When we self-reflect. When God has an opportunity to prune us. Help us look inward. We can then change the things in our lives that are not working. We can help ourselves shed the things that hinder us from loving God and our neighbor. Then through this pruning/self-reflection we grow deeper in love with God and with one another.

We become the people who are invited to follow God's commandments, which Jesus sums up as love God with all our hearts and love our neighbors as ourselves. As it says in Deuteronomy, if we follow God's commands we will experience life. So, God's love leads to life.

Jesus then goes on to invite us to abide in him, because he is the example of what it means to love. Jesus lives out the commandments, the love of God and neighbor, and then breathes on us the Holy Spirit so we too can live out the love of God in our world.

We talked about February 2nd above. Now I want to talk about February 1st till the 7th when people across the world come together to celebrate Interfaith Harmony Week. We come together in solidarity to celebrate the goal of living in peace and harmony in

our world. This happens annually. In Calgary, we are gathering tomorrow morning for a breakfast where we will have a chance to grow in relationship with one another. Loving one another. Dialoguing with one another. Showing gratitude for one another and for our creator. And then on Thursday evening we do it all over again around the dinner table.

When Jesus breaks into our lives his goal is to teach us to be his disciples. Jesus teaches us to imitate him in our world. What this means is that we are invited to love one another as God loves us. To love people wherever they are at.

This isn't always easy. Often times the people Christ invites us to love are people we don't have a lot in common with, or at least it seems this way. Many of who Jesus loves and invites us to love live on the margins of our society.

When we hear the middle section of our gospel this morning some interpret this to mean we as Christians are supposed to believe that our way is the only true way and everyone else's way is wrong. Unfortunately, this way of thinking reflects how we treat others. We don't see them as equals. We try so hard to change them. We focus on their faults and our strengths. We can become very exclusive saying or doing things that sadly hurt our neighbor instead of embracing the love Jesus shows us.

Then there is all the misinformation out there about people who believe in things different from us. It is easy for us to listen to some of these people because they show a lot of passion about what they believe in even if it causes us to do things or believe things that are harmful to others and to ourselves.

Unfortunately, we are seeing a growing trend of hatred in our world towards those who are visibly different. I think it is time that winter breaks into our lives. It is time for God to prune us. To give us opportunities to self-reflect. To seek out new beginnings, so that we come away feeling renewed to love our neighbors again and appreciate them for who they are.

What I found in my dialogues with people of different faith traditions is how much we all have in common in the end. And that even in the diversity there is so much there we can learn from each other.

Winter is a time for self-reflection. A time for renewal. My prayer for all of us in this world is that we take this time to open our hearts to God's pruning/cleansing action of us. To feel renewed and able to see where we can love as God loves.

Because what Jesus' words this morning are about is not us becoming less loving and less accepting. What Jesus is saying to us is that through God's pruning of us, as we abide in Jesus' love, we will become more loving and more accepting of others. Meeting them where they are at.

Because we all stand in God's gracious love. We all have experienced the kind of love that lifts us up when we fall short. The kind of love that makes us feel welcome when others don't. The kind of love that truly changes us into loving people working towards peace and harmony in our world. Embracing our winter spirituality.

Let us pray, loving God, as we reflect on our winter season, as we reflect on the love we have for others, continue to prune and cleanse our hearts. Continue to help us reflect, so that we can feel renewed through this pruning, this self-reflection. So, we can work towards new beginnings. A life where we all live in peace and harmony loving one another as you love us. **Amen.**

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