



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

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"Pruned" (THE VINE Sermon Series)

The Rev. Dr. Dan Chun

If you were not here last week, know that we've started a new sermon series called THE VINE. It's based on the Gospel of John chapter 15, where Jesus said, "I Am the Vine."

Every week, all the way up to Christmas, we will look at another verse in sequence in chapter 15, and learn together what it means to be connected to Christ, what it means that Jesus is the Vine and we are the branches, what it means to abide in Him, to be nourished and bear fruit in Him. Let's read the Bible verses in unison. Please stand.

*John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.*

*John 15:2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit.*

*John 15:3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.*

*John 15:4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*

*John 15:5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

*John 15:6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and*

*withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

*John 15:7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

*John 15:8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

Please be seated. Today we look at verse 2 only, where it says we are going to get pruned. "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit." (John 15:2)

At first glance that verse might be worrisome. What do you mean He removes every branch that bears no fruit? What do you mean He prunes us? Pruning means cutting!

Today we are going to talk about pruning, which involves suffering. But we are also going to talk about hope.

## 1) What is Pruning

Smart vinegrowers know that they have to cut back on the very plant that they want to grow and bear fruit. In fact, normally 80-90% of the previous year's growth is pruned back. By pruning or cutting the vine, the roots grow broader and deeper, which in turn would lead to more and better-tasting grapes.

In the first year vinegrowers might cut down the vine down to just

one or two of the best buds. The second year they would prune back new growth. Then on the third year they literally see the fruit of their labor.

Here's a video that will give us a clear picture of what pruning is. This is Stefano Watson in Sutter Creek, CA of Avio Vineyards. (A video clip was shown.)

Now that is what happens on top of the ground. But what is happening underneath the soil when we prune? Let me show you now show a 40-second video clip from another vine expert. (A video clip was shown.)

Since I am kicking off the series, I am trying to build the complete picture for you of what vine growing, and specifically pruning, is like so that for all the following sermons in the series, you will really understand vine growing, grape growing and wine making, which is an integral part of our sacraments like the Lord's Supper.

As I mentioned earlier, 80 to 90 per cent of the old branches is pruned back. Yikes! When we hear of pruning, we might think, "No, I would rather get to the fruit immediately. Forget three years to bear fruit." But remember, good things take time.

## 2) The Good News of Pruning

When God prunes us, it might mean allowing us to suffer.

**B**ut we must realize that the end result is the blessing of fruit.

The pruning may mean choosing to stop a drug or alcohol addiction. Yes, it's difficult, but in the long run it's good pruning because it leads to better health. Pruning may come in the form of bankruptcy, which is painful to go through but we can come out more financially responsible, which is good.

Sometimes God instigates the pain; sometimes He doesn't, but He allows it. Sometimes the pruning may be the result of something bad we did, while other times it's not our fault, where something external hits us out of nowhere. God did not cause it, but He allowed it so we can grow from it, and He promises to be with us during the suffering. Sometimes it is a bit of both external but also do to our own fault.

I remember, as I told some of you, that when I was about to go off to seminary, my college chaplain said to me that he had something to share. I thought it would be a blessing, but it turned out to be a prophetic word. He said, "May God shake the ornaments off of your Christmas tree theology and replace it with real fruit."

Wow. What are you saying? That my faith is naïve? That I view following God as nothing but a happy journey? What did my college chaplain mean?

Some of you may already know this, but for those who don't, the pruning started two weeks after I arrived in Pasadena, CA for seminary. My wife at that time told me that she didn't love me and that, in fact, she never loved me, so she left me and divorced me. The five years after that were a long desert experience of constant pruning, as I had to go deep into my soul asking myself— what I did wrong, who am I, should I even be

a pastor, what is my self-esteem really based on? I remember thinking that if the Bible is really true, it has to be true for a person like me.

But the pruning continued when something happened that seemed really mean from a seemingly mean God. Soon after my wife left me, I limped into my preaching class. We had to pick out of a hat a scripture verse or passage that we would have to research and then preach on for the class. Totally random. It was like a sorting hat of Scripture.

I pulled out a piece of paper and my heart dropped. My one verse was this: "*Then the LORD God said, "It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper as his partner."* (Gen. 2:18)

God seemed like a very mean God at that point. There I was hurting from my divorce and God gave me a verse like that.

I think when it comes to pruning, we all think it is unfair and mean as we're going through it. We may even think that God is mean. But God was slowly shaking my naïve Christmas tree theology, knocking off the ornaments – the shallow belief of my faith system— in order for real, mature fruit to grow.

First of all, not all of us are called to be married. I firmly believed that after what I went through. In God's timing, He made me a singles pastor in California to singles only, thousands of singles, for six and-a-half years. My heart was so empathetic for them because I had been single twice (before I got married and after the divorce) and I knew the opportunities and challenges of being single.

But it was only recently that I realized that when I picked out that Genesis 2:18 passage from the sorting hat about how it's not good for a man to be alone, it was not a mean,

sadistic joke from a cruel God. No, it was actually a PROPHETIC word from Jesus who was saying to me, "Dan, it is not good for you to be alone. But guess what? You are not alone. I am here with you. And I am going to walk through this with you every painful step of the way. And you don't know this yet, but five years from now, I am going to introduce you to another woman, Pamela Lum, and she will be the partner I have designed for you from the beginning of time. She will be a partner in the home and in ministry." Pam and I will have been married this year 34 years. We have three wonderful children who are followers of Jesus.

The years in seminary were really hard. I flunked a New Testament Survey class the day after I got my divorce papers served to me. I was not in good shape. But today I am a trustee at the seminary where I got an F. And I am on the Seminary Student Committee where I try to pastor the students with great empathy of their life struggles. I know pain and pruning, and that's why grace and suffering are my favorite topic to preach on.

And for those years in seminary where I doubted and was told that maybe I shouldn't become a pastor because I was flawed and divorced, well, I think I have done okay as a pastor. When we left our previous denomination last year, we were the 19<sup>th</sup> largest church out of nearly 10,000 churches. And Pam and I have had the privilege through Hawaiian Islands Ministries, which we founded 32 years ago, to have trained more than 50-thousand church leaders. God allowed me to be super pruned to have some fruit in life.

### **3) The Reality of Pruning**

The reality is this: we don't really learn unless we suffer. I don't think we learn as much when we are in seasons of success. Maybe we don't learn anything at all.

**D**ecades ago, I talked to Tom Landry of the Dallas Cowboys. I went to his office where I got to hold his Super Bowl trophy. (Actually, I think he went to the bathroom and I ran over and picked up the trophy and had a friend take a quick picture and then I sat down again.) Tom Landry's teams have been to the Super Bowl five times and won the title twice. They also have 5 NFC titles and 13 divisional titles. Tom Landry also has the third most winning record all-time for an NFL coach.

But here is what Tom Landry told me in his office. It is harder to be a Christian in winning the Super Bowl than at any other time. Success pulls one away from God. Suffering brings you closer.

This is a big warning to those of you who are flying high in success. Don't get too "taran-taran" about yourself thinking you are hot stuff. Landry said it was in losing that he was closer to God. He grew more spiritually in losing seasons. He said he was really close to God in his first year coaching the Cowboys. Why? His record was zero wins and 11 losses. He had four more losing seasons then in his sixth year he finally hit even with seven wins and seven losses. He was really close to God. And then he started winning and winning and he said it was harder to follow Christ when you are winning.

What can come with winning? Money, pride, adulation, and success, but also lack of learning because success makes us think we know every thing. We feel we don't need God as much as we thought. But in suffering we are more humble and we feel the tender hands of God.

Think about this. It is in the pruning that the Vinegrower, who is God, is the closest to you, the branch. He is tenderly holding you. Yes, He's pruning but He is also closest to you.

When a Vinegrower is watering you, He is farther away. When He is fertilizing you and throwing manure on the soil near you, He is farther away. When He is spraying you for bugs, He is farther away. When He is tilling the soil in nearby fields, He is far away.

But when He is pruning you, He's right there. He is careful, tender, not reckless, making sure your support system is not cut off. He's cutting around you so that you might be healthier and bear fruit.

Jesus said these words: *"I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart! I have overcome the world."* (John 16:33)

Yes, He said we will have trouble. We will have pain. But in the midst of pain, He can give us PEACE! He can give us courage, so take heart. He will overcome the world so that someday there will be justice.

Is suffering really the mark of those who follow Jesus? Here's what the Apostle Paul wrote in a letter to the Romans: *"Now if we are children, then we are heirs—heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in His sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory."* (Rom. 8:17)

Jesus, who was perfect, suffered. The apostles, who were spiritually mature, suffered. Yet we, American Christians, can sometimes whine when we suffer, thinking that somehow we should be treated differently. We should be exempt from pain and suffering? If our Lord Jesus Christ suffered, why do we think we should be the exception? Why should we, the servants, be greater than our Master? Somehow when pain comes, we should know that God is doing a new thing in us. Pain often carves away what is not helpful. The bad

attitude and habits—those are the dead branches that need to be pruned.

Like in weightlifting, pain can often help us have bigger muscles. No pain, no gain. And as the branches get cut off, we will get stronger. We will be unencumbered in growing to be mature Christians.

When we are being pruned, we will find God. We will feel the close intimate presence of God the vinegrower. At times it might seem that God is cutting us up, hurting us, when he is really cutting OFF dead wood on us so that we might be healthier.

Michelangelo creating something beautiful out of a simple block of marble is a good illustration of how God has a purpose and destiny for us. The story goes that Michelangelo was asked how he was able to sculpt the beautiful statue of King David that's on display in Florence, Italy. Michelangelo answered that he just chipped away anything that was NOT David.

Our Heavenly Father is chipping away or pruning away anything that blocks the real beauty of the image of Christ in us. Pruning may take away our favorite blanket, so to speak, something we have been holding on to for too long, and we need to grow out of it. Or maybe worse, it is a false God.

For the last two sermons I have been talking about the false gods and the false lies that we all live with and how we must cast them away, or, may I now say, allow God to prune them from us.

#### **4) The Fruitfulness of Pruning**

There is a woman named Vicki Flippin. Yes, that is her real name. A hapa-Asian pastor of a church in New York City.

**S**he once told this story to illustrate what it means that Jesus is the Vine and she the branch that got pruned. (“Fruit of Pruning – we are free!” Vicki Flippin – March 16, 2010).

One day she went to a retreat and at the retreat they had an exercise called “*Speaking Truth to Lies*.” The attenders were asked to write two or three lies about themselves. These were not lies like “I am really a brunette but I have dyed my hair blonde,” or “I say I tithe but I don’t,” but more about lies we tell ourselves, the kind we have hung on for years – the kind I mentioned in the last two sermons like – “I am not pretty enough, strong enough, smart enough, accomplished enough.” They are lies like, as Vicki Flippin suggested:

- If I weigh more than 120 pounds, no one will find me attractive.
- Because I have cancer or because I can no longer move the way I used to, there is no purpose in living.
- I don’t have a problem with drugs or alcohol.
- If I weren’t so needy or noisy or nosy, the abuse would stop.
- Because I was abused, I am worth nothing, and maybe it was my fault. Because I have lost a loved one in death or a loved one who has been unfaithful, I have no future.

The retreat leader asked the attenders to write down 2 or 3 lies they say to themselves. The two lies Vicki shared on her retreat were these: “I am not as important as my colleagues” and “My worth is dependent on what other people think of me.” She wrote these lies down on two pieces of paper, and then in small groups they went around to share what they wrote.

In her group there was a young Nigerian pastor named Michael. He later told Vicki that, as a black man, he connected with the lies

she believed and shared with the group. Michael empathized with her because when he sat in meetings with all-white pastors, he struggled with the same lies.

Michael held the two pieces of paper where Vicki had written the two lies, and he looked straight into her eyes, and said these words, “Vicki, I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that these are lies; but that you are created in the image of God; and that Jesus Christ abides in you and you abide in Christ. And this is where you get your worth.

“I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you are every bit as much a child of God as anyone; that you have been called and commissioned by the church of Christ for ministry in this world.

“I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you will bear fruit for God’s vineyard, through the power of God that is within you!”

He then gave her back those two pieces of paper, and she ripped them up into pieces, and cast them on the floor. Vicki said she did that “to show herself and everyone in the room that the power of the vine-growing God was pruning those dead and unfruitful lies from her life.”

Vicki pointed out that the Greek word for “prune” is *kathairo*, which is release to the word “cleanse” (*katharo*), which is related to the word “catharsis,” which means to purge, purify, release.

I say we could all use today some pruning, some *kathairo*— some cleansing, and some *katharo* – some catharsis to purge and be released from some lies that are preventing our fruitfulness for the next chapter of our life.

I want to close with an

exercise. You have all been given a yellow post-it inside your worship bulletin. I am going to ask you right now to write down two or three lies about yourself. I am going to give you two minutes to think and write them down. Don’t worry. I am not going to ask you to share them with anyone.

If you need a pencil, raise your hand and the ushers will quickly get one to you. Right now, write down two or three lies you tell yourself. (Silence for two minutes as people wrote down lies they’ve believed.)

I want to close with this. Everyone please stand. Everyone hold that piece of paper in your two hands, facing me. Now look at me and hear this: I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that these are lies; that you are created in the image of God; and that Jesus Christ abides in you and you abide in Christ. And this is where you get your worth.

I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you are every bit as much a child of God as anyone; that you have been called and commissioned by the church of Christ for ministry in this world. I declare with the authority of the gospel of Jesus Christ that you will bear fruit for God’s vineyard, through the power of God that is within you! In the name of the Father, the Vinegrower, Jesus the True Vine, and the Holy Spirit, who cares for you. Amen!

Let’s pray. Lord, please seal this in these people’s hearts. May they know that you have truly cut away these lies, and may they now bear much fruit. Amen.