



# SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

September 20, 2015

"Loads of Hope" (Vine Series) - John 15:3

The Rev. Tim Shaw

**T**im Keller, the pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, makes this very interesting observation about the passage we're studying this fall. He says, "Imagine that you needed to go upstairs and the only way up was an escalator going down. How would you make progress in a situation like that? You'd only make progress through tremendously hard exertion, breathtaking and breathless exertion. On the other hand, how would you lose ground in that situation? In a situation like that you wouldn't have to do anything at all, just let the down escalator take you where it's going." That's kind of a depressing picture of life that Keller is painting there. Is he right about that? Is life just a down escalator?

One of the last times I flew to New York, I think it was when I was returning from Africa, I landed at JFK which is out on Long Island. Once I picked up my luggage and cleared customs, I jumped on the Air Train that took me from the Terminal to Howard Beach where I could take the A Train to lower Manhattan. I'm too cheap to pay for a taxi and I like the

adventure of riding the subway in New York.

I was headed to Jersey City to meet my friends who were going to put me up for a few nights. I know flying into Newark would have been smarter but it was probably more expensive. So, I took the A-Train to lower Manhattan and at the World Trade Center Station I walked with my luggage to the PATH station which took me under the Hudson River to Exchange Place in Jersey City. When I got to the station I discovered that the escalators weren't working so I had to haul myself and my bag up eight flights of stairs to the street. That was a bit of a workout.

A couple of days before, the escalators going up at Exchange Place had malfunctioned and suddenly reversed direction and started going down instead of up. That's super dangerous on an escalator crowded with people. When that happened, people tried to run faster and faster to keep heading up, but people started piling up at the bottom of the escalator.

That's what Keller is talking about. Life can be like that. You're headed up, life is good, even easy. Then all of a sudden something changes and you're battling to keep moving forward.

Keller says, "Everybody knows there is a principle of decay in the world, so you don't have to do anything wrong in order to go bad; you don't have to do anything at all. The Apostle Paul says in Romans 8 that the world is subject to decay. It groans. I think everybody knows this implicitly. Your body, if you do nothing with it, goes bad."

Let me introduce you to Chris the Aussie Sheep. For five years Chris wandered, on his own, around Canberra, Australia. It's probably more accurate to say that Chris waddled around Canberra for five years. When people finally came across Chris his fleece was so overgrown that it was hard for him to move, let alone see. For five years he was never shorn. Chris the Sheep is the perfect example of what happens when you do nothing but allow the natural forces of nature to run their course. Look at him!

The sheep experts in Australia say that the shearing of Chris was potentially life-saving. It's highly likely that Chris had never been sheared before. He had little contact with human beings. The man who sheared Chris said, "He was incredibly stressed from the new human contact. We were unsure if he could live through this ordeal as he was clearly stressed and could die easily of shock." The shearing expert got his fleece off in one piece and it weighed almost 90 pounds! Since his shearing, Chris is doing well. He's lost about half his body weight and he's wearing this cool green coat.

This whole story about Chris the Sheep raises a question for me about the history of sheep on our planet. I don't know the answer to this question. Was there a point in time, before we started using their fleeces to keep us warm, that herds of giant, Chris-sized sheep just waddled around in one large pack? I don't know the answer to that question.

There is a principle of decay in the universe. Life is a down escalator. We know it. If we want to do better, if we want to move forward, if we want to make progress, life tells us that it's going to take a lot of hard work. If you want to go backwards, if you want to lose ground, you don't have to do a whole lot. That's the way life is. Or is it?

Jesus is going to challenge some of those assumptions right here in this passage of scripture. In John chapter 15 he's going to

suggest that there is another way to live. Life does not need to be just a down escalator that you're trying to climb using your own power and your own strength.

One of the things Jesus tells us is that we need to be pruned in order to grow. Things need to be cut back in our lives if we want to go forward. We learned that last week from Pastor Dan. We sometimes need a shearing, in order to be healthy. Sheep need to be sheared or shorn or have their fleeces cut back. Otherwise, they end up as waddling behemoths who are fearful of the very thing that can save their lives.

If you want beautiful long-stemmed roses, rose bushes need to be pruned. A rose bush, left to itself, will get all tangled up. A rose bush that is not cut back will grow in on itself. It will get in its own light. It needs help to grow in the right direction so it will produce better quality roses. And people need to help a rose bush to do that. We prune a rose bush so it will stop wasting its energy and become more productive. We cut out the parts of the plant that are growing inwards and getting all tangled up. We prune a rose bush to encourage the shoots that are growing outwards, toward the light. You prune the rose in other words, to help it reach its full potential.

If you want a bumper crop of succulent grapes, grape vines need to be pruned as well. They need to be cut back to produce more grapes. Vines, like rose bushes, need to focus their

energy on producing good quality fruit, rather than lots of second-rate grapes. We need to train a vine to grow towards the light rather than getting in a tangled mass. Left to themselves, vines produce a lot of unnecessary growth which must be cut away if the vine is truly to become what it's capable of being.

That's what we're like. That's also true of churches. We need to be pruned in order to grow so we can produce the fruit we were created to produce. And even more fundamentally we need to be tapped into the only One who can be a reliable source of life. As Pastor Dan pointed out, Jesus says in verse one that he is the True Vine. Jesus literally says, "I am the Vine, the real one, the one you can rely upon."

Jesus knows there are a lot of vines out there that promise us the nourishment we need but when we tap into those vines, again and again we end up discovering that they can't sustain us. They can give us some help but they can't give us the life that we need. Lots of really good vines are out there promising to give our lives meaning and purpose but when we try and make them the ultimate source of our life, they can't sustain us nor can they help us produce the fruit we were created to produce.

Jesus is the "Root of the matter" as theologian Dale Bruner calls Him. Every human being is searching hard for the root of the matter. What is my life all about?

**J**esus makes the assertion that He is exactly that. He's the Root of the matter. He's the Vine, the real one. He's the only reliable source of life. If you've discovered this for yourself you know that when you're in touch with Jesus, when you're tapped into His life, you know that you are in contact with the central reality that gives meaning and purpose to everything else.

Okay. Let's turn our attention to the verse we're focusing on today: John chapter 15 verse 3. Let's read it in context.

John 15:1 - "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower (God the Father is the one doing the pruning and the shearing - he's the one who does the cutting back so that we'll grow in the right direction, be fruitful and not waste our energy growing inward and getting all tangled up). Verse 2: He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he **prunes** (make note of that word), he prunes to make it bear more fruit (There it is. Pruning is a strategy for better quality growth; Chris the Sheep didn't like being sheered; it probably scared him almost to death but it probably saved his life). And now here it comes. The message of the gospel in 14 words. Verse 3: You have already been **cleansed**/by the word/that I have spoken to you." That's the good news of the gospel.

Let's stop right there and think about what Jesus is saying in verse 3. Speaking to His disciples just before He's arrested and crucified, Jesus

says, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you."

That, my friends, in one sentence, is the good news of the gospel. The good news that Jesus announces to His disciples in this one sentence in John 15:3 is the fact that those who are listening to Him, those who have allowed Him to do his pruning work in their lives, have already been cleansed in some fundamental way and that cleansing was accomplished by a word that Jesus had himself spoken to them verbally and with His life. They had already been cleansed. It was something completed in the past and that finished work was beginning to bear good fruit in their lives.

It's super important for us to understand and remember that the gospel of Jesus Christ is not fundamentally good advice about something you and I now need to do. The story of the Bible is not first and foremost about you and me. The story of the Bible is the grand, incredible, fantastic story of what God has done and is doing for the world.

The gospel is not advice. The gospel is news about what has already been done for us. It's an announcement. The word gospel literally means "good news." It's good news about something that has already been accomplished for us in the past that has incredible implications for our lives today. Jesus says, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you."

It's very interesting that the word translated "prune" in John 15:2 is the same Greek word translated as "cleansed" in John 15:3. Pastor Dan pointed out that very interesting connection last week.

Jesus says, "Already, those of you who are my disciples are cleansed. You've been pruned. You're a purified people because of the Word I have spoken to you." Earlier that evening Jesus had dramatically washed His disciples feet. We talked about this in our sermon series on the Book of Ephesians. At the last meal that he had with his disciples, Jesus, God in human flesh, knelt down and washed His disciples dirty, stinky feet. And then announced to them that they are now "a wholly clean people" (John 13: 10). They had been cleansed because of what He had done for them and not because of what they had done for themselves or for God. The need to be cleansed is something all of us understand. We experience that need every single day. Our bodies, our clothes need to be cleaned every day...well, I know MY body and my clothes need to be cleaned every day!

There's a ministry that our Impact team is exploring called Laundry Love. It's a very simple, straightforward ministry to men, women and children who are homeless in our communities. It started on the mainland and some churches here in Hawaii have picked it up and are starting to offer this service to people in our communities.

**M**any people who are homeless have made a simple statement to those who are seeking to come alongside them. Hidden in this simple statement of fact is a plea all of us can understand. They say, "If I had clean clothes people would treat me as a human being. If I could just get my clothes washed, it would make a significant difference in my life." That's a very simple request. I just want to be clean.

What a Laundry Love ministry does is partner with a local laundromat, bring in a team of people to do three simple things: first, provide the detergent to wash clothes, second, provide the quarters to pay for the washing and drying of the clothes (the person washes their own clothing). As we do those two things we have an opportunity to talk and listen to a person living on the streets and maybe build a relationship.

The Impact Ministry team is actively looking into this local ministry opportunity. I called this sermon "Loads of Hope" and that's what Laundry Love is offering to men, women and children living on the streets. They're offering loads of hope. And that is exactly what Jesus is offering us in John 15. He is offering us loads of hope. The hope He is offering us is connected to His ability to make us clean. The gospel of Jesus Christ is intrinsically hopeful because it is not fundamentally about us and our goodness and faithfulness. It is about the faithfulness and goodness of Jesus, the One who is the only reliable source of life. He is the

one who can cut away, prune back, cleanse us, forgive us and set us free to be the people we were created to be.

Jesus knows that we need to be cleansed. If we're honest with ourselves, we know that is true as well. We first need to be cleansed by what Dale Bruner calls, "Jesus' Foot-washing Cross and Resurrection." When we begin to understand what is taking place on the cross of Jesus Christ and why it was necessary, we are first cut to the heart. There's a process of pruning that begins.

Pruning takes place again and again. We are re-cleansed, regularly and as a community, whenever we hear Jesus' Word spoken. We are re-cleansed, again and again, whenever His body and blood are received in the Lord's Supper. It is during that Meal that we again learn to trust that God has completely forgiven us. And finally, we are cleansed by all the pruning experiences that the Lord allows and brings into our lives.

This one sentence in John 15:3 gathers up all of what Jesus was trying to teach His disciples when He washed His disciples' feet. God knows all about the depth of our need for cleansing. Seeing the enormity of our need, God emptied Himself, became a human being, lived a life of sacrificial love and died on a cross and then rose again from the dead. So, the word that God speaks to us is a word of grace and mercy. It is the context of His love and grace that we can admit what he already knows to be true

about us. That is the beginning of our liberation. This word of grace is the word that cleanses us, forgives us and begins to heal and transform us. As we begin to build our lives upon Jesus and His love and grace—as we grow in our experience of his grace—we begin to learn how to speak a word of grace to ourselves and to others.

A church that is deeply rooted in the Vine is a community of people where the grace of God flows into each one of us and out to one another. A church that is deeply rooted in the Vine and has experienced the pruning work of the vinegrower, is a church that is filled up with the love and mercy of God and that love and mercy flows from us and into the communities where we live and work and into the wider world. Stunningly, a word of grace is sometimes a word many people in the world don't expect to hear from a church. Grace is a word, when spoken as Jesus speaks it, that frees people to be truthful about their brokenness, their failures, their fears and their need for a Savior.

People need to hear in words and see in action this word of grace from Jesus through His people, the church. It is that word of love and grace that we will be sharing across this island on Saturday at Do Justice. It is that word of grace, spoken by Jesus, that prunes us and cleanses us and begins to set us free to be people who can extend that grace in our relationships, our communities, our workplaces and into the world.