**Apple Trees and Pruning Shears**

Unity Church June 29, 2025

Psalm 51:7-12 John 15:1-9

Anyone who grew up up around Greenfield remembers when there were Apple orchards all around. Although the scripture this morning is talking about vine dressing, I’d like to switch over to apples for a bit. We’re more familiar with apple trees than grapevines, and I suspect that quite a few of us have spent time pruning them.

How many of us have seen an old apple tree in someone’s backyard? We comment on it, the person smiles and says, “My Granddad planted that tree! It’s been there for almost 100 years!” They say this with about the same pride and reverence that someone will tell you that their grandparents or parents helped build this church. The next time this happens to you, take a good look at the tree that they’re talking about.

Right out our dining room window stands, actually stood, a rugged old apple tree. When Sherry and I first moved there, 20 years ago, I thought, “I can prune it and we will have apples next year!” In conversations with the couple who own the farm, I learned that this tree and about twenty others had been planted and tended by the husband’s grandfather. He grew apples as a hobby. Besides pruning and tending the trees, he was an amateur botanist who loved the art of grafting. It is said that at one time he had a single tree that produced 5 different kinds of apples.

But back to the old tree outside our window, it was a rugged old gnarly thing. Twisted trunk, branches going every which way, and a rat’s nest of branches on top that looked like someone’s bad hair day. When I asked permission to try and save it, I was told to, “Have at it, it not been pruned in at least 20 years.” So the following March, I dragged out the ladder and armed with pruning shears and long handled loppers, I told Sherry I was going to address the tree.

After about 20 minutes of trying to figure out what should be removed, I went to get the chainsaw, not to cut it down, but to remove all the dead rotted limbs hiding under the thicket at the top.

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This wasn’t my first rodeo, I’d been pruning apple trees under my mother’s supervision since I was old enough to climb trees. She would stand on the ground with a long sucker, pointing to what big stuff needed removed and then my brothers and I had to finish by lopping off all the suckers that pointed to the sky. The theory of apple tree pruning is that each branch should look like a hand extended flat, with nothing shading it from above. Every year, my dad would look at the “butchering,” as he called it, and ask my mother, “Exactly what do you have against those trees?”

Mom’s thought was that one should be able to throw a cat up through the tree and it not hit anything on the way back down. Although we never tried this, recalling how brutally she trimmed trees, I suspect it was true. But every year, the six old trees in the orchard provided Transparent for applesauce, Golden Delicious for eating and pies, and Northern Spies for apple butter.

In the same way that mom’s pruning made dad nervous, today’s scripture lesson makes us a little nervous, both personally and as a church. The idea of cutting, removing or pruning anything in our life or the life of the church can’t help but make us nervous. Even though Jesus tells us that our loving Father, God, is the one with the pruning shears, it still makes us nervous. All of us know that there are things in our lives that we would be better off without, but it’s our foible, our indulgence, our weakness, if you don’t mind. We also realize that there are things in our church that could benefit from updating or re-imagining, but that requires change and we like things the way they are.

As we get older, we appreciate the idea that some things stay the same. It’s rather comforting, realizing the constant change and turmoil that we’re faced with in the real world. Why can’t we at least have a church that’s as we remember it? Why does everything have to be updated, new and shiny? Why can’t we simply leave things alone, we liked them just the way they were?

I don’t completely disagree with this thinking, I love the old hymns of the church. I love the traditions of the church, saying the Lord’s Prayer, celebrating communion.

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But I keep coming back to a question, is the church here for us, or are we here for the church? More importantly, is the church ours or God’s? Maybe another way of asking it is: whose vine or apple tree is it? And yet another question: who is doing the pruning, and why?

Jesus tells us, “I am the true vine, my Father is the vinedresser. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” As I said before, this makes us nervous, but look at these two verses a moment. Not only are we getting pruned as the branches, so is the vine. The vine, Jesus, is perfectly comfortable with that, why? Because Jesus knows who is handling the pruning shears. In other words, the one who is dressing the vines is the one who created the vines, by definition he is the one who knows exactly which branch needs removed and which one needs improved.

Jumping back to the orchard, each year a tree grows plenty of wood that doesn’t help it in any way to be more productive. If one looks at an apple tree in the fall, after the apples have come off, there are all manner of little branches pointing straight up, called suckers. Don’t ask me why, that’s what they’re called. If you don’t trim them off, the tree will put energy into growing them instead of producing apples.

Likewise, if the branches that grow horizontally are not kept trimmed back to something substantial, when the fruit starts to grow, it will break off the branch because the fruit is too heavy. In spite of what my dad used to think about my mother’s approach to pruning, it is not an act of punishing a tree, it is an act of lovingly caring for the tree.

We tend to look at this teaching from Jesus and think, oh no, what if I’m the one who is cut off and thrown into the fire. We interpret this passage as another warning about Hellfire, and we quickly turn the page. I would argue that we need to look at the idea that the one who is pruning, loves the vine. He wants to see the vine become everything that it can. No one is talking about tearing it out of the ground and replacing it. He’s talking about it being the best, most productive that it is capable of. Part of that process is pruning the branches, trimming, shaping, cutting them back to a healthy, strong place; making them vital and thereby making the vine healthier. 3

It follows that if God, the vinedresser, loves the vine, He loves the branches. I would worry more about not being pruned than being pruned. While pruning, a branch that you ignore is either one that you haven’t decided whether or not to leave, or you want to watch it a while to see what it will become. If you get pruned, you’re a productive branch.

Bringing this from the orchard to our daily lives, as I said before, the idea of being pruned makes us nervous. None of us like to think about change, none of us want to let loose of those things that make up our lives, we like the familiar. But we need to think about the opportunity that we are being offered here. Our Creator, the one who knit us together in our mother’s womb, as the psalmist says, the one who formed us in that secret place, that one, our Dad is who is offering to improve us, make us better, healthier, stronger, more fruitful.

Do we really want to ignore that offer? Not only in our personal lives, but in the life of our church? It might be more comfortable in the short run, but what about the long run?

Back to the tree outside my window: that first year, I cleaned it up pretty hard. I removed all the dead and diseased wood, I gently pruned what was left. I watched as it put out blossoms that year and produced a dozen or so healthy apples. The following year, I removed the suckers and in climbing around the tree, realized that the trunk was hollow and there was water in the center of it from a hole in the crotch. The year after that I attempted to graft some branches from the top lower down the trunk. When I drilled into the trunk to place the grafts, I realized that there was about a half an inch of living wood on the outside of it. Sadly, the following, while guys were clearing a brush row on the farm, I told them to go ahead and take it down.

Trees are a living thing, some live for a very long time, growing and thriving. A church is a living thing, and yes, some of them live for a very long time, growing and thriving. But an apple tree, just like a church, needs tending, needs pruned, needs cared for. The next time someone tells you that the apple tree in their back yard was planted by their grandfather, take a hard look at it.

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Chances are it is twisted and gnarly, and hasn’t been pruned in a long time. It stands there as a living or possibly dying memorial to that person’s grandfather who planted it. Chances are, the few apples it produces are only fit for the deer who scrounge them.

The difference between apples, grapevines and churches, is that the first two are taken care of by people, the latter is pruned by God, the loving vinedresser. We, as believers, as members of this church and by definition members of the entire body of Christ, need to seek the face of that vinedresser, and willingly say, “You know what is best for me and best for our church, please prune us.”

We, as individual believers and members of a church ultimately decides what gets pruned, what gets changed. Our heavenly Father loves us, but He’s also a gentleman. Although He knows exactly what each of us needs, what this or any other church needs to be at their best, through the Holy Spirit, He will only change or prune what we allow of ourselves to be changed or pruned. We either offer ourselves to our Saviour and Vinedresser or not. A tree that is not growing, not being pruned, starts its slow process of decline. The choice is ours, on both a personal and a church level.

Our heavenly Father, who loves us, who bought our salvation and called us to himself, the one who created us and knows us and Unity church, wants the opportunity to make each of our lives the best that they can be. Jesus said, “I come that you may have life and life to the full.” He also said, “Every branch that bears fruit, My Father prunes, so that it may bear more fruit!”

Psalm 51:7-12

Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean; wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

Let me hear joy and gladness; let the bones that you have crushed rejoice.

Hide your face from my sins, and blot out all my iniquities.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me.

Do not cast me away from your presence, and do not take your holy spirit from me.

Restore to me the joy of your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit.

John 15:1-9

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. 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. 7 If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

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