



Bringing Home the Word



Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 3, 2015

God Pruned Saul and Transformed Him

By Janel Esker

Now that summer is around the corner, I look forward to breaking out my favorite outdoor friend: our electric hedge trimmer. My husband does a good amount of the yard work, but I might as well carve my initials in the trimmer—I love it. We have lots of bushes in our yard that need regular trimming, and I delight in shearing excess branches and pruning foliage to invite new growth and

Sunday Readings

Acts 9:26–31

After Paul's conversion, Barnabas took charge of him and brought him to the apostles.

1 John 3:18–24

Let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth.

John 15:1–8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower.

life. And I have to admit that the power-tool aspect of the trimmer is especially addictive.

Today's readings have a lot to say about pruning and shearing, but it's important to remember who holds the power tool. In the first reading, the early Christian community is suspicious of Saul's sudden conversion from Christian-persecutor to active disciple. They have a right to be uncertain, of course, but they learn that God pruned Saul and transformed him, and that they must welcome him into their community.

We're familiar with the image of Jesus as the vine and us as the branches, but sometimes we forget that in this image we're connected to Jesus the vine *and* to all the other branches through him.

We may not like all the other branches, or we may think they're in need of serious pruning or shearing. Yet our initials aren't carved in the trimmer. God's are. We're not in charge of pruning others (and ourselves)—God is.

Our job is to stay connected to the vine and to one another, to welcome even those we might find suspicious or distasteful or foreign to us. The community of branches belongs to Jesus—and to its members. †

REFLECTION
QUESTIONS

ONE? TWO? REFLECTION

- How do I abide in the risen Jesus?
- What attitudes and behaviors do I need to change in my life?

PRAYER

Risen Jesus,
your abiding presence
gives us hope.
Help me to be
a loving presence
to others.

Amen.

True Compassion Sees With Eyes of Humility

By Fr. Stephen T. Rehrauer, CSSR

In Catholic school I learned to repeat this phrase often: There but for the grace of God go I. It expresses gratitude for having been spared the sufferings we see others endure. It arouses compassion, moving us to help others shoulder their burdens. If the suffering of others is the result of their own wrong behavior, it teaches humility and solidarity, reminding us that were it not for God's help, we might have fallen into the same wrong patterns of life, bringing similar disgrace upon ourselves. Lately it seems this phrase has been replaced by a pair of more pernicious ones: "Thank God I'm better off than they are" and "Thank God they finally got what was coming to them."

Moral psychology examines the question of when people help others in need and when they don't. Studies show that we tend not to help others if we believe they have been the cause of their own suffering. In responding to those whose lives have been ravaged by alcoholism, drug abuse, prostitution, poverty, hunger, AIDS, rape, violent crime, and murder, it matters a great deal to almost everyone whether we see that person as "deserving" or "undeserving" of their fate. When we believe someone has been innocently harmed, it elicits sympathy, which motivates us to help. On the other hand, if we believe that the other "deserves" what is happening as the result of something he or she did,



then the emotion elicited is righteous indignation—even satisfaction—at seeing cosmic justice occur, and we are motivated to deliberately withhold assistance. This tendency seems to be universally hard-wired into human nature.

Turning away from another's pain, regardless of its causes, is hardly the moral response the Gospel of Jesus Christ teaches us. Sooner or later we all make wrong choices in our lives. Sometimes our wrong choices flow from a flaw in ourselves; sometimes we are overwhelmed by a situation and really can't see any other way out of the mess we are in; sometimes we just want something so much that we are willing to do whatever it takes to get it. Sin is a constant part of the human condition. St. Paul reminds his readers constantly that all are sinners, all deserve condemnation, all stand in need of forgiveness, and all need Christ to help them. If God treated

us the way we are tempted to treat one another, offering compassion only to those who "deserve" it, there would be no hope for any of us.

God's justice is mercy. Grace is offered to the sinner precisely because he is a sinner: one who deserves condemnation and punishment through his own fault but who receives instead compassion and forgiveness. The sinner who returns causes rejoicing in heaven. It is precisely when we have been the cause of our own mess, and because we have been the cause of our own mess, that God draws near to us most powerfully and most lovingly in Christ, who is help for the helpless. This is God's *Caritas*.

Jesus tells his followers to be compassionate and to show mercy if they wish to be children of the Father, whose sun shines on the guilty and the innocent alike. The phrase, "There but for the grace of God go I," should also help us to understand that when we see others in need or in pain, the concern of a Christian should not be whether they "deserve" it. Rather, the personal question should be, "Who am I as a follower of Christ and a child of the heavenly Father if I fail to show compassion to this person in need?" followed by a second prayer, "O Lord, show me how I can be a tangible sign of your love, a grace for this my brother or sister who is in pain," precisely because "there but for your grace, I might also have gone." †

WEEKDAY READINGS May 4-9

Mon. Easter weekday
Acts 14:5-18 / John 14:21-26

Tues. Easter weekday
Acts 14:19-28 / John 14:27-31a

Wed. Easter weekday
Acts 15:1-6 / John 15:1-8

Thurs. Easter weekday
Acts 15:7-21 / John 15:9-11

Fri. Easter weekday
Acts 15:22-31 / John 15:12-17

Sat. Easter weekday
Acts 16:1-10 / John 15:18-21