

The Church of Saint Pascal Baylon

Fr. Mike Byron, Pastor: Sunday Homily

1757 Conway Street • St. Paul, Minnesota 55106 • phone 651.774.1585 • e-mail church@stpascals.org

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A friend of mine has a lake cabin in Wisconsin, to which he invites a group of us old college buddies every September. And one of the great experiences there is sitting around a large campfire late at night, just talking and staring at the stars. About 5 years ago, there was a violent storm that swept through the area and created a massive blowdown of old trees in the woods. Suddenly there was more available firewood than anyone could use, and cabin owners were encouraged to cut up and haul away as much as they wanted.

My friend filled his whole garage with wood that year, and we're still using it. But I remember him telling me at the time that he'd have to wait for at least two years before that wood could be of any use for a campfire. It would take that long—stored indoors—in order for it to dry out. One minute it was alive and moist. The next minute it was dead—but still moist.

It's strange to think that a living tree is good for many things—fruit, shade, beauty, shelter, nests, climbing, the environment, animals. And even a dead tree can be very useful for lumber, furniture or a campfire. But it has to be a *very* dead tree. All dried up, able to be sawn or easily broken.

Just about the worst and most meaningless time in a life of a tree, in fact, is the time when it is dead and doesn't realize it yet, and maybe doesn't look like it yet. Obviously, trees are not self-conscious. They don't know how valuable or useful they are or aren't.

But in today's Gospel of John, Jesus finds the image of a vine—and we could extend that to a tree—to be a very useful way for us to reflect upon our own lives as disciples. Like trees and vines, when we are attached to a life source there is almost no limit to what we can do. Trees and vines need soil, and water, and sunlight to flourish. People need God, and community, and love to thrive.

But then there are the walking dead—like the moist wood of a newly extinct tree. They are still here on earth and occasionally can seem to be alive, but because they have been cut off from any source of life beyond themselves, they are dead and may not yet even know it. They are the most useless of all, and the most to be pitied because of their ignorance. To be alive is a blessing. Even to be dead in the Lord is a blessing. But to be neither is just tragic.

And it is to the half-dead that this gospel of Jesus today is addressed, and sadly, it is likely that his audience could include an awful lot of people—including Christians.

Who are they? The ones who think that we can succeed in life all by ourselves, in glorified isolation, like branches apart from the vine, like people apart from God, and relationships and real love. The most fortunate among us are those who have learned this—often through trial and error—or those among us who've never yet *had* to learn this because we have always been blessed with the gifts of faith, family and Christian community. Sometimes that awareness comes through agony and loss—like the pruning of the vine.

But the ones most in need of the Lord's encouragement are those among us who are dead and don't yet realize it, self-centered and self-satisfied without the realization that there is no such thing as lasting life and happiness without God and community.

And, believe it or not, God actually wishes us to be happy! Embracing the Easter gospel is supposed to elate us, not bring us down. This good news is about freedom to become fully alive—which can never happen all by ourselves. To know and to believe this is *liberation*, not constraint. It is not weakness or failure on our part to recognize and embrace our dependence upon a greater source of life. We are the branches, not the vine. That's just the fact, and it's okay. In fact, it's a lot easier.

So let us pray for those who are in the equivalent of chopped wood purgatory—those who live like the wood spending two years drying out in that garage, maybe imagining themselves to be still alive or maybe imagining themselves to be fully dead, when in fact they are neither, and are therefore useless.

They live among us in large numbers, and our task is to share what we know by the way that we live.