

Message Delivered at Christ Church

May 9th & 10th, 2009

TEXT: John 15:1-9

Delivered by Paul A. Johnson

I want to show you something...

The preacher began by doing a couple selected yoga positions...that's right, yoga.

That's called yoga, for those of you who don't know...

I've been doing a little yoga over the last little while. I mostly get my exercise from running. But I am growing more convinced that the Lord gives to each set of legs a finite number of miles they can run in a lifetime, and that mine are quickly approaching their divine apportionment. So when a couple of friends from Christ Church started talking with me at the Y about how much they liked the yoga class they were taking there, I decided to give it a try. They were very enthusiastic! And I kind of thought "what could it hurt?"

So I walked into the workout studio that first time—that Tuesday night, beginning about 7:00 PM--and the lights are kind of low; and there's this gentle music in the background, and the instructor clearly came from the Mister Rogers school of elocution because when she spoke it was like butter. You get started kind of easy, and I looked around the room seeing what's going on. Everybody looked very serene; some had their eyes closed; their face is at peace. My wife was right next to me, and she's just at one with everything...

"This is going to be a piece of cake," I thought to myself. This is going to be the easiest way to get in shape since they invented that belt you've seen on the infomercials you can wear for two weeks that will give you rock hard abs.

So then we began progressing through the different positions, the first one of which had me standing on one foot in various ways. And I start wobbling all over the place. Do you remember "Weebles wobble but they don't fall down..."? Well, I'm wobbling, and I'm going down, and I'm taking with me everyone who's around me... This time, gravity will most definitely prevail.

Some of the moves that came next felt to me like completely unnatural positions for any human body to be in...especially mine. Now, I'm looking around and seeing everybody else able to do these different things with their legs, and arms, and back all over the place. But I kept getting stuck because there are lots of things my body does, but bend like that isn't one of them.

Now this class was called "power yoga." I should have understood something based on this title, but I missed it... And so, without really picking up on what was happening—those yoga instructors can be sneaky—

you realize you are ending up in positions that can only be sustained if you are willing to make friends with the burn that comes when you are at the end of your physical strength. People who lift weights know about “the burn.” But I don’t lift weights precisely because I do not like “the burn.” Now, I know it’s good for me, in a Castor Oil sort of way. When the muscles burn in weight lifting or—to my surprise--yoga, they’re breaking down; when you rest and they knit back together they knit back together thicker, making the muscle stronger. But before all that happens, you got to hurt, and get shaky, and sweat. Sweat I like; shaky I’ll tolerate; pain I prefer to avoid.

So at that first yoga session I was the last to leave the room. It took me a while to get up off the floor. The instructor was very kind. I told her it was my first yoga session. She said, “Really? I couldn’t tell.” But do something for the first time, and it’s always difficult. And I’ve been back a few times since then because I’ve decided I like yoga. And you know, do anything enough and it becomes easier, and that’s what’s happening in my relationship with yoga.

But here’s what I got from it, even that very first time...yoga gives our bodies three things they need for full health: **Strength; balance; and flexibility.** Talk with anybody here who’s done yoga, and they’ll tell you the same thing.

Strength; balance; and flexibility. They matter for our bodies. I’m suggesting today they also matter for our spirits. So here’s a reminder of a few simple things:

We all need *strength* to live life fully and make it through the challenges. We all want to live a full and rich life, and live it abundantly. And we all know there are plenty of challenges in life. Life ain’t always easy, so it’s good to know from whence our strength cometh...

Well, these words from Jesus we heard today are from the Last Supper. When he finishes saying them all, he’s going to go to the cross—which is, of course, the godly acknowledgement that life is filled with suffering. These are part of his final words to all the disciples at that Supper, and since we’re reading them, we’re at that supper. And before he goes, he reminds us of the source of true power and strength.

There is the vinegrower. And there is the vine. And what we are is the branches. And every good thing that is in that ground...all the minerals, all the water, all the richness travels through the vine for the purpose of getting to the branches, not for their harm but for their good; to make them stronger. That’s how vines work. Vines are there for the purpose of creating branches, and branches are made strong because they receive from the vine. Cut a branch off—remove it from its source of nourishment--there’s nothing left for it but withering. That’s just the way things work. But keep in touch, and there is life, and health, and strength. That is also the way it works.

He’s our vine, he tells us. Our true vine. And strength—true strength—is what comes from that vine.

Now here's the first thing to say about that: He is always connected to us. He doesn't stop coming. And his coming to us is not dependent on us. He's always reaching out, and we hope you've heard us say that before. That's a simple declarative statement. It's an "is."

But you know, it's Mother's Day weekend, so I've been thinking about my mother. My mother is always my mother. No matter what, there is that connection because she's my mom and I'm her son. But I am better connected with my mother when I pick up the phone and call. Whether I call or not, she's always my mom. But I'm better connected when I am intentional about being connected.

So the second thing to say is that it's kind of like that with the true vine: we're connected, but we're better connected when we intentionally seek to be connected; when we do our part to stay in touch and keep the relationship strong...to do whatever it is we do to keep the connection tight...worship; fellowship; give; serve; pray; study; spiritual reading; love...all those things that are sometimes difficult because maybe we don't think we know how to do them, or maybe don't want to make time for them. But when we do them the best way we know how—which is all God ever asks of us; to do the best we can--the spiritual muscles are built up and we are more strongly connected to the vine who is always connected to us and gives us strength. All those other things we think promise strength and life—and we all know that litany--don't deliver us in the end. They're false vines. But the true vine does.

Now, I was talking the other day with someone who really likes to garden. I like talking to gardeners because I think I'd like to learn how to garden. God makes things grow. But gardeners do things to help the process along... they water; they pull weeds; and they fertilize.

My friend's comment, however—and she grows rose bushes—was that the one essential thing gardeners really seem to avoid is pruning. We see how the plant is growing, and don't want to cut anything off because it's like we're killing something.

What happens, though, is that if there is never any pruning, the energy gets diffused and the branches go all over the place. For the whole plant to be in *balance*, sometimes branches need to be cut back. It's basic horticulture. Pruning gives to the plant strength and order. If the branches are never pruned, they'll still be branches. They'll just be all over the place. Plants don't get cut back to make them smaller or to cut them down to size, but to give them a balance that makes them stronger and the right size.

You see, pruning ain't such a bad thing.

I have to tell you that I don't understand specifically what Jesus means when he tells us that the Father will prune us. It could be that he's talking about persecution of the Church. It could be he's talking about those who reject the Gospel. It could be he's talking about individuals, and the trials that come within us in the life of faith. It could be a lot of things. It's a good discussion question for the car ride home.

For myself, it seems I am most likely to be pruned those times I forget that I am the branch, and not the vine; when my perspective grows out of balance, and I come to think that what **I** want matters most; or that **I** know best; or that **my** plans are sufficient. When I place myself at the center seems to be those times I am most likely to be pruned back a bit, and be reminded that I'm just one more silly human being, and not nearly as much in charge as I think I am.

But here's the odd thing...my experience is also that when I am pruned and brought back into balance, I find I am most likely to be given a life that is more balanced. When I am open to being brought back to being rooted in Jesus rather than in myself, life becomes less chaotic because I am reminded that in all things and in due time, God will work it out. A little bit of pruning, and we let go of things we don't need to hold on to because we're not the vine. We're brought into a little spiritual balance--so we become better spouses, and parents, and friends; become more patient; listen more and talk less; smile more and laugh better...because a little bit of pruning reveals that there aren't nearly as many things to get upset about as we sometimes think. When we remember we're just the branch, the pressure's off. The vine will hold us up, and work things out; and bring us to a balanced center; and help us see clearly that there's God, and there's us, and we're not the same thing. And lo and behold, God is making good things happen. We just may not have been paying attention. Fruit was being borne. That's always true.

But here's what's also true--pruned or not, we don't always get the choice of the kind of fruit it's going to be, so a little bit of *flexibility* in our understanding of how God works goes a long way.

I want to tell you about a godly conversation I had with someone from this congregation this past week. I share this conversation with their approval, and the details of the situation aren't important so I'm going to speak in pretty general terms. But God was teaching in this person's story, so it's worth telling...

This is a person who has consciously and intentionally been seeking God's will for their life for quite some time. This is a true seeker. He deeply desires to do what God intends for him. And first it appeared to be this, and then this didn't work; then it appeared to be that, and then that didn't come through. And then finally, God opened a new door and this person walked through it with expectancy and anticipation. It was as if this new opportunity was "it;" this is what he had been waiting for.

He started his new calling, and almost immediately problems arose. Things happened that weren't expected; there were personal risks that hadn't been fully disclosed by the higher ups; and it was soon clear that this new opportunity wasn't going to work out the way this person thought it would work out; and that, in fact, it would have to end prematurely. Which it did. So there was disappointment, frustration, and sadness.

Until some friends came forward, and told him what he'd meant to them; until some friends came forward, and shared with him how significant

his impact had been; how he had made things better, and made a positive difference...just not the kind of positive difference he thought we was going to make. And what was revealed to him, well before he ever sat down to chat with me, was that what he had thought was a wasted portion of his life hadn't been wasted at all. That, in fact, his work had borne great fruit. It just wasn't the kind of fruit he was expecting it to bear. He had one idea of how it should look, but God had a completely different idea. Because lots of times, that's just the way it happens.

There are those branches that bear big, juicy fruit that everyone can see. And we all bear that kind of fruit sometime. But sometimes, we bear fruit different than what we intended; or what we expected; or what we thought possible on our own; so it may be that flexibility in our own expectations of ourselves and of God is a Christian virtue worth cultivating.

There is no fruit borne that is too small. A watermelon is bigger than a strawberry, but they both taste mighty fine. There is no act of love that does not matter. God does not waste us. We do not always know what kind of fruit our acts of grace may bear. But may we be protected from ever believing that they bear no fruit at all.

Strength; balance; flexibility.

For what it's worth, we have a yoga class now here at Christ Church. It meets for one hour on Monday nights beginning at 7:00 PM. It meets in the parlor. Show up, and you'll become stronger, more balanced, and more flexible. Your body will feel better. And let me tell you...if I can to the tree, you can too.

But may it be we accept that the Lord offers these same gifts to our spirits, as well...a strong connection to the Vine who makes us stronger; and sometimes a pruning that brings us back to balance; but always there is fruit, so may we be flexible enough—even humble enough—to let God decide which kind, exactly, we shall bear.