

No Longer “Perilized”

It is good to be back in the pulpit at St. Peter’s from our most wonderful Christian men’s retreat last weekend. We are blessed and can be proud that we have the Shannondale Mission to serve the poor people of the Ozarks and also to provide sacred space for Christians to gather for adventure and spiritual renewal. I left there with men of our church less than a day after returning from Huntsville, Alabama for a conference called, “Ministry in Perilous Times.” Sounds uplifting doesn’t it? But who would challenge that these times aren’t perilous? What are we Christians going to do about it?

I introduced the speaker, Eden’s own, Dr. Peggy Way, by saying that Peggy’s two favorite sources for understanding these perilous times is one, *The New York Times* and two, *The Nashville Network*. Each portrays the perils of life from a different perspective, right? One tells us through printed reports about the agonies of financial calamity, unemployment, political division, greed, sociopathic rampage, poverty, piracy, war, injustice and swine flu. The other shares with us through country music personal pains of separation, job loss, deceit, aging, finding our purpose, finding our place in society and finding true love. Both are important to the people we care for, right? I am speaking of those in our families – our biological family and our church family.

If we are Christian, we are spiritual caregivers. Our care begins in a different place than caring professionals because our lives intersect in non-professional ways. We don’t get to stand behind shields of the academy, medicine, social work and workplace etiquette. We worship together, eat together, share together, laugh together and cry together.

I don’t need a speaker to remind me that beautiful examples of tender Christian caregiving are our mothers. I wondered if sharing what I learned about peril from my conference would be a good fit for Mother’s Day. Here again, in times of personal peril, moms know when we are hurting. They are first to recognize it and the first to address it. We need such motherly touches because the people who are most often in peril today are the very ones least equipped to process and discuss it. A mother’s love fills the emptiness when words don’t cut it. One family was facing a particular hardship. The men were throwing around a bunch of tired solutions and the children were just sulking in silence. Finally, mom stood up and said, “I’m going to fix some tea.” That was perfect – it’s what the doctor ordered. People relaxed and passed the sugar. Everything from then on went much smoother.

When we face hardship or peril, of course our spiritual cup of tea is to turn to Jesus, our drink of hope. Just knowing that Jesus is watching over us brings calm and perspective. There was one exception. A robber breaks into a home and hears a voice say, “Jesus is watching you.” Startled, he asks, “Who said that?” Again, the voice says, “Jesus is watching you.” The robber turns around to see a parrot. His reaction was not one of hope but disdain that the pronouncement of “Jesus is watching you,” was coming from a bird. “Foolishness!” he thought. He asks the parrot what his name is. The parrot

replies, "Cornelius." The robber asks, "Who names a parrot 'Cornelius'?" The parrot replies, "The same person who named that Rottweiler behind you, Jesus."

Our Gospel lesson for today is the Vine and the Branches. Just as our local vineyards have begun to leaf out, Jesus is talking about hope leafing out in abundance. We will bear much fruit and become his disciples. We become grafted to the true vine.

I love the lush imagery of the vine that we recollect every time we gather at the Lord's Table. But listening more closely, this teaching actually frightened me. Jesus removes the branches that bear no fruit. They are pruned by his Word. The dead wood is gathered and perhaps used to light the torches of those who labor in the vineyard noon and night.

How can you be confident that your branch is among the good branches? Are you well-connected to the true vine? As gardeners know, even green shoots have to be thinned out so energy will go to just one branch for the largest fruit possible. Reading closely, even the good branches are pruned too; they are cut back to size. We may think we bear ample fruit that will make us worthy disciples, are we so sure? Bearing fruit reveals the discipleship that is already in us. Remember, the unproductive branches are people *within* the Christian faith community who do not bear fruit in love.

It might serve you well to stop by a vineyard and see what the branches of a vine actually look like? In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine.

What this vine image suggests about community is that there are no free-standing individuals in the realm of God; we branches encircle one another completely. The fruitfulness of each individual branch depends on its relationship to the vine, nothing else. When we are rooted in Jesus, we give up an individual status to become one of many encircling branches. If we don't, we surrender our place on the vine – we are pruned. The Greek word used for pruning also meaning cleaning or cleansing. We are clean when we stay in relationship to Jesus and his word.

Once again, a mother's perspective calms concerns of pruning peril as she nurtures the vine of our families, or our family trees. A mother's love enables the best in us to grow. Her care for us reflects what readers of scripture are asked to consider when encountering texts that point to hope: "Who or what can I trust? Who am I supposed to be? How can I live with others? What is it all about?" We are to exhibit a motherly love that simply goes beyond believing that there is a vine. We are to be believing. Remember that the opposite of love is not hating; it is simply not caring.

As Dr. Way went on to explain, our task as caregivers are described in the poem that she and many faithful mothers embody: *We are simply asked to make gentle our bruised world; to tame its savageness; to be compassionate of all, including ourselves; then, in the time left over from these ministries of justice and of care, to repeat the Ancient Tale and go the way of God's Foolish Ones.*