

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our risen Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

There have been many stunning Super Bowl TV commercials over the years, but few have generated the phone calls that one did fifteen years ago. This year 2000 commercial of which I speak was sponsored by a mutual fund company, but nearly all of those who called in weren't interested in investments.

They wanted to know if what they had seen was true. The commercial ended with former actor and well-known quadriplegic, Christopher Reeve, getting out of a wheelchair and walking across a stage to accept an award.

The people calling wanted to know if Reeve had experienced a miraculous break-through – and when would such treatment be available to others?

Those who called in, however, were disappointed. The event they had witnessed had been simulated by computer animation. The purpose of the commercial, stated the mutual fund company, was to give people an inspiring vision for what was possible.

Reeve, who died in 2004 at age fifty-two, had suffered a severed spinal cord in a horseback riding accident in 1995, leaving him paralyzed from the neck down.

His tragic accident, and resulting physical consequences, illustrate how utterly dependent all the functions of the body are on a healthy and obstacle-free connection to the brain. Without this healthy connection, the body will not function well.

In today's Gospel, Jesus offers a similar analogy to help us understand our absolute dependence on him for the ability to function spiritually. Jesus likens the relationship of those who desire to be his disciples to the relationship between the branches of a fruit-bearing plant with their life-giving vine.

In this analogy, Jesus is the vine; his heavenly Father is the gardener; and all the potential and actual disciples are the branches. When the branches are securely connected to the vine, they bear fruit, as expected. In a moment, I'll share what I think are telltale signs which give evidence of the strength of this connection.

But first, recall that Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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" (John 15:1-2, paraphrase).

The recession which began in 2007 may have ended in 2009 – I'll let the experts in the economy make that call. But likely we can agree that corporate down-sizing and consolidations continue. To me, it seems like the "pruning" of staff and laborers is still happening.

We can now see quite clearly now see that when global economies lose their momentum, people tend to lose their jobs. Granted, once-thriving corporations often have to let go of some of their best people in order to simply survive as a company.

The salaries and influence that these premium employees command are simply too weighty for the weakening company to sustain. Some of these executives who have to let these people go hope, if and when the company recovers, that they will be able to woo some of these all-star players back into the fold.

But another harsh reality of this type of pruning, however, also proves to be a way of letting go of unproductive people. When reorganization hits a company, often the first people to be cut are those who are failing to produce.

While this might seem to be a very severe way of dealing with unproductive people, it seems that God is just as serious about keeping people fruitful in the kingdom of God.

As Jesus reminds us in Luke “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:24).

The “fruit” that God expects us to bear basically manifests itself in three ways.

Most obviously, in the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control (Galatians 5:22-23).

Not only should these traits be evident in the life of every Christian, they should be deepening and humbly more noticeable, both to the believer and those around him or her. In addition to these godly traits, we should also be able to identify and exercise our spiritual gifts in such a way as to encourage growth in those around us.

Along with spiritual gifts, I think God also gives all of us spiritual “gaps” that can only be filled by our fellow believers -- thus encouraging interdependence in the body. If our spiritual gifts are left unidentified or remain static, those “gaps” remain unfilled and growth in the church is stymied.

If a Christian is growing more Christ-like in character and actively exercising his or her spiritual gift, then the third and final “fruit-bearing” manifestation is the ability to fully experience the presence of God as we worship.

For those branches well-connected to the vine, prayer becomes more vibrant and dynamic. Singing becomes a fuller expression of the heart. We find ourselves more clearly attuned to teaching of the Word and better able to appropriately apply biblical truths to our lives. In all these aspects, worship becomes rich and soul-satisfying.

Experienced gardeners know how and when to prune their plants in order to maximize their crops. If they see an offshoot with browning leaves, they cut it immediately. They understand that this branch is simply draining water and nutrients away from the healthy branches that have the capacity to bear fruit.

God, the Heavenly Gardener, also wants to make sure that the branches which can bear fruit for his kingdom are getting all the available resources, and that those branches which are draining resources and are unproductive are eliminated.

So if the fruit of Spirit, spiritual gifts, and genuine worship seem to be suffering in a believer's life, what kinds of "pruning" does the Heavenly Gardener do in order to spur on increased growth?

Since the Lord "disciplines those he loves," (Hebrews 12:6) part of the pruning process in our lives includes events and circumstances that grab our attention and point us to what needs to be corrected.

When these deficiencies are called to our attention, God expects us to draw from his strength in order to take corrective measures.

If the fruit of the Spirit seems to be stunted in our lives because of unrepentant or un-confessed sin, or simmering anger, then these areas of disobedience need to be acknowledged, addressed, and corrected.

If there are needs in the church that match our spiritual gifts, then we should attempt to fill those gaps as our own well-managed time and resources allow.

And if our worship seems to ring empty, we probably need to examine our lives for any obstacles that might be preventing us from fully sensing the Spirit of God – and then ruthlessly cutting those impediments from our lives whenever they are discovered.

In all of this, the key to bearing much fruit is staying well connected to life-giving vine of Christ. As we labor and toil for the kingdom, we must never lose sight of the source of our strength. We must keep reminding ourselves that apart from Christ, we can do nothing.

By acknowledging our minute-by-minute dependence on the Lord, we are assured of staying connected to the vine so that we can bear much fruit for God – in our Christ-like conduct, in our spiritual gifts, and in our ever-increasing ability to sense the presence of God when we worship. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus forever. Amen.

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