

Mystic Congregational Church, UCC

Mystic, Connecticut

Sermon from May 10, 2009

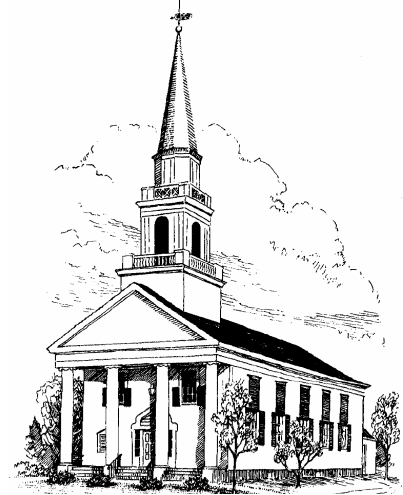
Rev. Ann M. Aaberg

“To Prune or Not to Prune”

Scriptures:

1 John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8



There is a wise old adage that says you should not be given something unless and until you know how to care for it. Parents use this reasoning when the ownership of a dog or cat comes up for question. Well, someone should have been aware of it before they let me plant the hydrangeas.

For those of you not familiar, hydrangeas are those beautiful flowering shrubs, which blossom through the summer with those big, round, snowball-like blue blooms. My favorite. Seaside climates are very favorable to them, so when we re-landscaped the front of our old house, my wish for a wide bank of hydrangeas across the entire front of the porch was fulfilled.

Now, as many of you know, we used to live on a corner, anchoring a small village, where many would pass by: in cars, on foot, on bicycle, pushing baby carriages. So all of the exterior improvements we made to the house happened in a very public way. And you would be amazed at the number of strangers who offered their opinions. Be that as it may, all were quite complimentary of our new sod lawn and the choice of hydrangeas.

And everyone had instructions for their care. And *I* had no clue. The key decisions seemed to present themselves in the fall and, in one way, centered around what to do with these magnificent blossoms as they softly changed from blue to magenta and green. Cutting them was not the issue as much as how to preserve them. I heard “put them in water,” “put them in a vase with no water,” “tie them and hang them upside down,” “spray them with preservative,” “don’t spray them with preservative,” and so on.

But the autumn decision of most importance, once the bushes started taking over the porch, was how to prune them in order to contain their growth but, at the same time, to ensure many robust blooms the following spring. Between on-line instructions and the advice of passers-by, each year held a different approach and brought different results and, of course, somehow sanctioned unsolicited comments from all who had one to offer. It didn’t seem to matter what I did. One year, I had very few blooms (“Oh...what happened to your hydrangeas this year?”) The kind and observant ones said, “No one seems to have many blooms this year...”). One neighbor who never failed at hydrangea nurture recommended chopping them off at the knees—his knees—for never-fail results. That spring we had *no* blooms. One friend whose

yard burgeoned with the beauties told me it wasn't my pruning; it was the nature of the winter in between—dry, wet, amount of snow, sunshine. The summer those bushes yielded a bonanza of blue followed the fall I had done nothing at all.

Our Scripture passages this morning speak of God's love and our love for each other and Jesus' being the vine and we the branches. It was the pruning that got me to wondering. Jesus tells his disciples, in this his farewell discourse to them on the night he was betrayed, that God the vinegrower prunes both kinds of branches: removing the ones who bear *no* fruit *and* the ones who do to make them bear even more fruit. And I thought of us, Jesus' disciples, the branches in a long line of growth, passing on God's love and nurture to the next round of growth, knowing that we want to be as fruitful as possible and make our connection to the next branches as fertile as possible.

So we must prune in our own lives. Some of that pruning is easy to identify. Many of us can be spread too thin—not only our involved parents and their very active children, but I hear from many retirees that they've never been busier. A lot of this is good and healthy, but we are all challenged to assess the busyness in our lives and to determine what may be growing needlessly out of control, weakening the parts of us that are meant to bloom, that will bring us closer to God rather than farther afield.

Some of us can use some pruning around our habits of excess: too much of *anything* that always seems to take priority over our true direction as children of God and disciples of Christ. And we can all probably use some pruning away of our opinions on what others need to prune!

Yet, having said that, both of our readings this morning also remind us that we are all part of the same vine, all of us made possible and nurtured by love, God's perfect love. So our focus also needs to be expanded beyond our own branches to love one another.

On this Mother's Day, I wish to share with you a story of three mothers, all mothers to the same four-year-old female child. The first was the child's birth mother and, for whatever reason, she was unable to care for her adequately, and the county placed her baby girl into foster care. The second mother, the child's foster mother, for the three years she was responsible for her care, repeatedly told the child that she was not her real mother, and that she could give her back, throw her out, at any time. The little girl arrived at preschool with a host of behavioral problems. She has recently been permanently adopted by a third adoptive mother and her husband who have committed to raise this little girl in their new permanent family, and the child's behavioral problems have radically worsened. This little one wants desperately to return to her foster mother, despite the treatment she received there, because it's the only mother she's ever known. Fortunately for the child, the consistent care in her life has been from the teachers and staff at her preschool, who have access to a full cadre of resources to help her and her new family.

This baby, this toddler, this preschooler, is a tender tendril of *our* vine. We can listen to her story and blame the birth branch or the foster branch, but they and we are all part of the same vine. Before we rush to prune away what we think is dead wood, we need to consider

what stories may lay behind the story we just heard.

Our Women's Fellowship in their programming this year have focused on these tender new branches, children everywhere. This winter we learned of incarcerated mothers whose daughters are nurtured by the Girl Scouts. We have dedicated people here who read to homeless children each Wednesday at the family shelter in Norwich during the Nancy Peterson Story Hour. Our mission dollars move locally and globally to aid children everywhere, many of whom share the same story of the 4-year-old preschooler and much, much worse. They are all on our vine.

And if we take the time to follow the vine back, examining with loving eyes, as we are advised to do in our Scripture this morning, we will find good intentions behind horrible mistakes. We will find abuse behind the abuser. We will find tragedy behind the alcoholism. We will find abandonment behind those who threaten the same. And, as John writes this morning, we will find fear behind all of those withering branches: fear in need of love.

As Jesus' disciples seeking to be full bearers of fruit, we know that where the vine is weak, where it meanders off away from community, *our* ability to bear fruit is affected. And we grow in a fine and delicate balance: called to prune our own lives, but also called to contribute to the health of the rest of the vine, while remembering that God is the vinegrower and the ultimate judge of where the dead wood lies.

So, let us not be too hasty, but let us be bold. Let us not rush to judgment, but let us rush to love.

Turns out the trick to hydrangeas is not to prune what appears to be deadwood, because that's where the blossoms will appear the following spring. As tempting as it may come to be for those new adoptive parents to give up on their four-year-old damaged, bruised, little branch in the coming springs they will live to see her fully bloom out of what appeared to be dead wood.

We humans can't predict where the blooms will appear, but it is our job as Jesus' disciples to do all we can out of the love given us by our Creator to love one another. And that includes working very hard on our common vine to eradicate those things which choke its newest growth, the children in our midst and in the world: poverty, war, lack of education, lack of clean water and food, exploitation. On this Mother's Day, whatever our status, whatever our gender, we are all mothers. May we pour forth the love received from our Mother God, revealed to us by Jesus, to nurture our newest fruit. They have been placed in our care and their lives depend on it. Amen.

