

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER
Year B: Acts 9:26-31; Ps 22; 1Jn 3:18-24; Jn 15:1-8
May 2, 2021
Fr. David Pignato

In our spiritual lives, most of us think that if we are faithful to God, He will hear our prayers and reward us and bless us. We hope and pray that, if we are faithful, God will reward us with the blessings of a good and peaceful life. After all, Christ taught us that God is a Father who loves us as His children and gives us what is good for us. Jesus said, *“What father among you would hand his son a snake when he asks for a fish? Or hand him a scorpion when he asks for an egg? If you then, who are wicked, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will the Father in heaven give the holy Spirit to those who ask him?”* (Lk 11:11-13). Jesus was promising us that God the Father will always give us what He knows is good for us.

But the Gospel passage for this Fifth Sunday of Easter contains a spiritual lesson that might be hard to hear and hard to accept. Jesus says, *“I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me and I in him will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing”* (Jn 15:5). *“Just as a branch cannot bear fruit on its own unless it remains on the vine, so neither can you unless you remain in me”* (Jn 15:4). *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit”* (Jn 15:1-2).

Most of us are probably fine with the part about staying connected to Christ, like branches on a vine, and trying to bear fruit for Him. Perhaps we have already learned the truth of what He says – that without Him we can do nothing. But what about that part about being pruned, if we *do* bear fruit? Jesus says that those who bear fruit in the spiritual life we will be pruned by His Father, so that they can bear more fruit.

The idea of pruning does not sound pleasant. To prune something means to cut it back and clip its growth. And to be pruned by God suggests something that might be painful at first, even if it yields some good result in the future. Jesus seems to be saying that if we make some progress in the moral or spiritual life, or if we are faithful to Christ in some way and our life is pleasing Him, we can expect some pruning as a result.

What would this pruning from God most likely look like for most of us? Well, it could be that God might allow us to be given some correction that will humble us, so we can grow in humility. Or, perhaps God might allow some injury or obstacle that slows us down, so that we will focus more on our spiritual growth and listen more closely to God's guidance and direction.

But, remember: whatever form our pruning takes, it's not necessarily a punishment from God. Christ said His Father prunes every branch that bears fruit, so that it can bear more fruit. This means that if we encounter some trial or painful experience in life, it could be because we were doing something right, that we were doing something well, that we were bearing some fruit for God, and that our life was pleasing to Him. We have a tendency to assume that all suffering, or pruning, is a punishment or a sign of God's displeasure. But Our Lord tells us that it might also be a sign of God's *approval* and His invitation to grow closer to Him, so that we can do even more good work for Him. When God prunes us, He cuts away our imperfections so we can grow even more toward the perfection of holiness.

If God is our Father in Heaven, and we are His children, then we should be willing to accept pruning or discipline from Him, trusting that it's for our own benefit. Every parent disciplines a child when necessary, to correct the child and protect the child from some harm. And God does the same for each of us. As we hear in the Letter to the Hebrews: “*[D]o not disdain the discipline of the Lord or lose heart when reproved by him; for whom the Lord loves, he disciplines; he scourges every son he acknowledges.*’ *Endure your trials as ‘discipline’; God treats you as sons. For what ‘son’ is there whom his father does not discipline?*” (Heb 12:5-7). We are told that God disciplines us “*for our benefit, in order that we may share his holiness. At the time, all discipline seems a cause not for joy but for pain, yet later it brings the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who are trained by it*” (Heb 12:10-11).

“*I am the true vine,*” Jesus says, “*and my Father is the vine grower. He takes away every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and every one that does he prunes so that it bears more fruit*” (Jn 15:1-2). These words of Christ might call to mind the famous words of St. Teresa of Avila, who said to God, “*Lord, if this is how You treat your friends, it is no wonder You have so few!*” But if we want to be a friend of God and grow in the spiritual life, then we should be willing to be pruned by Him, trusting that it will make us even more fruitful for Him. And once the pain of the pruning passes, we will experience the deeper joy of knowing that we have been co-workers with God in the great project of salvation.