

REFLECTION ON THE PRUNED VINE FROM JOHN 15

Painting and Written Reflection by Bette Lynn Dickinson



"The Vine" by Bette Lynn Dickinson. Acrylic and Oil on Claybord.
In Honor of Lauren Markel, who believed in Abiding and Revival.

the best quality fruit. If you aren't training them and tending to them, vines grow rapidly wherever they want. Like us.

If unintended, we will grow in whichever way we wish. When our energy and focus is divided between an unsustainable amount of activities and commitments, we can't produce sustainable, quality fruit. Or when our hearts are given over to multiple lovers besides God, we are unable to produce quality, lasting Kingdom fruit. This kind of fruit comes out of a heart fully devoted to God alone. Perhaps this is what Jesus wants to address when he talks about pruning. The purpose for pruning is to trim away the things that have gone astray, that are moving too far away from the center, from the vine.

Visio Divina

Let your eyes move through the painting. What catches your eye? Focus on that portion of the work and sit with it for a minute.

Breathe in and out and let your body and mind slow down as you meditate on the piece. Invite the Lord to speak to you about what you see.

How is God speaking to you through this painting?

Read John 15:1-17

Why Pruning?

In the translation of the word "prune" in John 15, we learn that this word in Greek also means to "clean" or "purify." He purifies those he loves - so that they might be more fruitful. What does this mean and how does this work?

Think *quality vs. quantity*. When a branch is pruned, it is stripped away of excess, or undesirable growth so the plant can focus its energy into the right places to produce

Winter Pruning

If a vine isn't pruned in the winter, it will try to produce fruit from various buds that remained from the previous year - sometimes up to 200-300 buds. The vine wouldn't be able to ripen this many clusters and also sustain adequate vegetative growth needed for harvest. It needs to be pruned back to just 1-2 buds on each branch so it can focus into producing quality fruit in the upcoming growing season.

When a vine is pruned in the winter - usually between January and April in Michigan, it looks unsightly. The beauty of the leaves and lushness of the grapes have been stripped away until all that remains are the vine and branches. A pruned vine looks vulnerable, exposed, and raw. Open to the elements without even a single green leaf to hide its twisted form, it looks to the untrained eye barren and unprotected.

We can resonate with this feeling, though, can't we? We have felt the sting of pruning. And so somehow when we look at pruned vines, there is a part of us that resonates and says, "Yes. I've been there." Or perhaps you are there now.

- When we lose a loved one and feel vulnerable, struggling to complete even the most simple tasks.
- When God puts His finger on a sin that needs repenting, we feel exposed and naked before Him. Confession hurts.
- When we let go of an unhealthy relationship and suddenly what we had turned to for validation or fulfillment is gone, we feel like we have lost a limb.
- When God prunes us of an addiction or unhealthy lifestyle, we are filled with the chill of withdrawal and wonder who we are without it. We feel a loss; what do we do with our unmitigated emptiness?
- When God doesn't answer our prayers the way we wanted Him to, we feel the sting of the not-knowingness, and the why questions that cut from the innermost place.

In the pruning, whatever hinders us from bearing the quality fruit God intends for us is cut away. In the pruning, our sin is stripped away so that we can more clearly display the image of God. The false self we use to cover our shame is peeled back. The leaves that perhaps were once green and full of life and the branches that were producing fruit at a time are taken away. We are stripped from our self-sufficiency, striving, idols, and the things we so often cling to for hope.

We can see this on an organizational level too - in our chapters, Areas, Regions, and in our National Movement. There are corporate sins we carry in InterVarsity that God has been pruning or wants to prune. Will we allow Him to prune us of these things - as painful as it may be? Can we trust that even though pruning may take time, intentionality, sacrifice, and risk, that God loves us enough to prune us that we might produce everlasting fruit?

Even when we go through loss, there too we experience a kind of pruning. In loss and grief we see our frailty and the brokenness of our world more clearly. We see the fall for what it is and experience

personally the havoc it has wreaked on God's beautiful creation. When we feel the sting of mortality, we cling to what endures. We seek the things that matter. The parts within ourselves, our loved ones, and our world that will be redeemed and raised with Christ for eternal life.

It is in the pain and vulnerability of pruning that we find Jesus, the suffering servant who is familiar with pain and who himself went through his own kind of pruning on the way to the cross, and on the cross itself. Not for himself, but for our sake. He covered himself in our shame and bore it. He too, was exposed and vulnerable in the shame of the cross. And then He allowed himself to be pruned of it through death once and for all. For all of us.

The vine pruned in winter is dormant and as silent as Holy Saturday. There is no sign of life. For a time, there is no movement.

Yet, this is where the real mystery lies. Out of the silence and death of the cross, a true vine bursts from the ground with power over death and evil on Resurrection Sunday. Through the cross, as we allow Him to prune us from the evil in this world, we too experience a resurrection and fruit bearing in its season - either in this world or in the one to come.

Questions to Ponder

1. What does it mean to abide in the vine - to be in Jesus? When have you abided in Jesus this year?
2. How does the idea of pruning resonate with how God has been working in your life recently? How can you invite Jesus to prune you right now?
3. Think through this last ministry season - what stage of the growth cycle (pruning, growing, fruit-bearing) has your personal life, ministry, or staff team just gone through? What do you need from Jesus to prepare you for the next season? Now ask him for these things in prayer.
3. Thinking of what stage of ministry you are in, what might you need to adjust in your schedule, plans, or structure in order to respond to what you or your ministry most needs at this time?

Creative Response Options

Consider writing your own psalm of lament regarding how you or our movement is being pruned. Draw a picture of what your pruned vine might look like to help you process this with Jesus.

Closing Prayer

Father, I thank you that you are an attentive Vinedresser who knows each branch intimately within Your Beloved Vine. Help me to listen to you and stay attentive to how you are at work in this particular season. Show me what needs to be pruned or tended to that I might bear everlasting fruit for your Kingdom.

Amen.

A Note from the Artist:

Just as I started painting the John 15 Vine, I learned that Lauren Markel, one of our InterVarsity Staff went into a coma after battling DIPG (an inoperable brain tumor) for 4 years. Most of my time painting this vine was spent in lament and petition for her. On Friday, October 25th, I signed up to pray for her and her family from 1-2pm. Later I found out that she had passed at 2pm while I was painting and praying for her. At one point I felt God invite me to dance (Lauren loved to dance). I believe that is the moment she went to dance with Jesus.

Lauren was a good friend of mine. She served on staff in West Michigan the majority of her time on staff until last year when she moved to Tennessee. John 15 was Lauren's life passage. She studied it over Sabbatical and shared passionately about it with anyone who would listen. Lauren continually challenged our teams to abide in Jesus.

She knew that abiding in Jesus meant spending the bulk of our work in ministry in a prayer life that overflows into ministry. In one of her prayer letters, Lauren said this, "When you abide in the vine and spend time with Jesus, you will bear much fruit. In Sabbatical, the truth of John 15 has soaked into the depths of who I am and I will never be the same coming back to campus ministry."

What I learned from Lauren was an intercessory prayer life that battled the enemy through worship. She invited her children to worship over the campus with her. She modeled to our staff team how to do this, and it changed how I do ministry. When I hit an obstacle, I would pray and worship Jesus in the midst of it and He would provide breakthrough in ways my striving never could.

In the last year, when Lauren was too weak to get out of the house, she prayed and interceded for staff and ministry from home. She always used to say, "my body is weak, but my spirit is strong," as she faithfully prayed. Indeed - she was stronger than most of even while she lay in bed resting.

By our American standards, as Lauren laid in bed, she was "unproductive." There was no outward display of strength, but an inner trust and dependence on the only one who can produce real transformation. Lauren believed that the battle was fought in prayer. Who knows how many spiritual victories God has given us through her prayers.

After I found out Lauren passed, I painted a small bud on the vine. This painting was how I grieved and lamented her loss, but there in her death was also a sign of hope that she is dancing with Jesus. Lauren deeply believed in Revival. She lived it in her prayers and her bold evangelism. She knew with her whole heart that Revival would not come out of our human strength and striving, but out of prayer. I pray that as we seek God for revival in our 2030 calling, we can continue to live into this testimony - praying faithfully, worshipping Jesus over our campuses for breakthrough, and proclaiming the Gospel as she did until we see her again.