

5 Easter – Year B – May 10, 2009
Acts 9:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8
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The town of Deadwood, South Dakota, was named for the many dead trees that lined a nearby gulch. In the mid-1800s, at the time of the Black Hills Gold Rush, the land was owned by the Lakota people under the terms of the Treaty of Laramie. So, from its illegal beginnings, it has quite the colorful history. Deadwood was known as a lawless and violent gambling town, attracting legends of the Wild West including Wild Bill Hickok and Calamity Jane. Today, one website says this about Deadwood, "... the entire Black Hills' town ... is still known for its wild ways. From our gold rush history to our eighty -- that's eight zero -- historic gaming halls, Deadwood is the ideal place to release your inner outlaw."

In today's Gospel reading, Jesus describes the sad state of becoming spiritual dead wood. We begin with the last *mashal*, or Hebrew image that Jesus applies to Himself. These "I am" sayings include images like light, bread, door, and shepherd, which are straightforward analogies to the Law, and faithfulness. The figure of the vine, however, is different. Israel is described as a "vine brought out of Egypt" (Psalm 80:8) and planted by God. And now Jesus is describing Himself as "the true vine" that is the 'real' Israel who draws all nations to Himself; who is the light and life of the world; the Good Shepherd who lays down His life for the sheep; the food and drink of new and unending life; and our door to salvation. In this Gospel, God the Father is the vine grower, the farmer who plants, tends and harvests the fruit of the vine. As Christians, our lives are meant to bear fruit for Christ to the glory of God's name.

In gardening terms we all know what pruning means and why it is necessary for healthy trees and bushes. Yet in the English translation of the word 'pruning' we could easily miss the point, except that Jesus goes on to say something that sounds a little disconnected with the previous sentence about pruning. "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you." That doesn't quite jive with "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit," until we know that the word translated as prunes also means "to clean out". Jesus has moved from farming and vineyards, to talking about our spiritual lives. Our cleansing in and by the word is what we celebrate during Holy Week on Maundy Thursday when Jesus washes His disciples' feet. In this simple gift, Jesus taught all His disciples at least two important lessons. Firstly, that humble acts of service are, and remain a part of God's will for our lives. And secondly, that through Jesus' death and glorious resurrection, He alone has cleansed the whole body of humanity from sin and death. All Jesus' disciples accepted the gift, except Judas, who, like a dead branch fell away from the source of life. In faith and by the grace of God, all who abide in Jesus, are clothed in righteousness and cleansed from all sin.

When I was nine or ten, my teacher asked the class to do a science project about growing and measuring. It was spring, and our next door neighbor had the most beautiful cherry blossom tree in her front yard. Each spring the tree was transformed, taking on roughly the shape and color of a giant whirl of candy floss; a riot of pink blossoms exploding in a dense mass, followed by tender green shoots as the leaves emerged. With our neighbor's permission, I cut a small branch off for my science experiment, and put it into a jam jar full of water on the kitchen window sill. I remember vividly how excited I was when the tiny budding leaf shoot continued to grow over the next few days. It was like a miracle to me. I charted its progress faithfully each day, logging the measure of its life as the teacher had asked. And then it began to stop growing, and after another few days the budding leaf started to wither and die. The excitement I felt watching the leaf unfurl dissolved in tears. I was really sad when I realized that the branch needed much more to thrive than I could give it with water and a sunny spot on the windowsill.

Jesus' message is just as clear in our Gospel reading. We cannot bear fruit by ourselves, unless we are connected to the source of all life, Jesus, the true vine. Our fruitfulness comes from being in the community of faith and practicing the Way that Christ taught us. There is a warning in Jesus' message as well. A warning about complacency, a warning about getting so cozy in our comfort zones that we stop moving forward, stop growing towards the light like the branches of a tree, and stop bearing fruit. The

sad truth is that there are some in the Body of Christ who still hold on to the title Christian, but have effectively severed all connection with Christ. They no longer practice the Way through any of the spiritual disciplines like prayer, Bible study, community worship, or sharing their spiritual gifts to build up the Body of Christ. Those who keep up a façade of faith may still be caught up in the life of the community, but God sees through all pretenses to our hearts. Discipleship is not static. The forgiveness we receive at our Baptism, when we become members of Christ's Body and one of the vital branches in the tree of life is just the beginning. Our commitment to follow Christ as a disciple is a dynamic and transformative way of life. The verb is active. We glorify God as His faithful and obedient children when we bear fruit according to His will, and when we continue to be disciples with all that that encompasses.

Even within the life of a faithful believer there are areas of my life and yours that have become like dead wood. If they ever did, they now no longer bear fruit for God. In the same way that God will lead us forward through prayerful discernment as we seek His guidance, it takes prayer to understand where the dead wood is in our spiritual lives. Prayerful discernment is essential before we go cutting anything out of our lives. Prayer is crucial, because only God can tell the difference between truly dead wood, and some facet of our spiritual life that is merely dormant or undeveloped. As we have grown in our faith journey, many of us have discovered gifts of God that we never knew we had, but that are now bearing much fruit to the glory of His name. How easy it is to forget that discipleship means *following* the Good Shepherd's lead, *listening* to the Holy Spirit, and *obeying* God's commandments. Obedience, in particular, goes against everything the world teaches us to be as independent thinking adults. But as Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing" despite what we believe about our own ability to make good decisions. We have to ask ourselves what parts of our lives are truly dead wood that must be cleaned out. An old, ingrained habit perhaps, that crept into our lives stealthily, but has now taken hold of us and started to eat up our time and resources? Or maybe we need to understand what the fruit in our lives is in order to see where the dead wood is lurking. God's Word tells us what His fruit looks like. Being fruitful is primarily about loving God and loving one another, doing good works according to our God-given gifts, dying to self and to sin. It looks like the lives of those who gather others to Christ, who are growing in God, confessing Jesus' name in word and deed. In short, it looks like a life that continues to receive God's blessing in all the fruits of the Spirit.

It's time to get out of Deadwood -- to let God prune away our inner outlaw. In last week's epistle, the first letter of John said this: "Everyone who commits sin is guilty of lawlessness; sin is lawlessness" (1 John 3:4). The town of Deadwood was aptly named, and not only because of its infamous lawlessness, but also because finding so much dead wood meant that the flow of life-giving water had been cut off or diverted. The good news for us today is that it doesn't have to be that way. Our God is gracious and our Lord Jesus is the Lord of all life. In Him, we are like the trees described in the first Psalm, "planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season." What if every single day of our lives is the right season to bear fruit to the glory of God's name? What if instead of releasing our inner outlaw, we unleash a torrent of God's love into the world? What if...?

Amen.