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St. John's Episcopal Church
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Easter V (B) (John 15:1-8)

Ah, vines. Just yesterday I was looking at the fence along our driveway, where all the vine shoots are totally exposed, as yet un-leafed, and thought, "I really should get my clippers and whack away that thing."

And then I thought, "Well, it really truly isn't harming anything, and it looks rather nice to have lots of greenery covering the fence." And so I went inside. There. My justification is complete, my work is done.

And then there's some pesky false raspberry vine that keeps invading my yew bushes... Well, that will **have** to go...

But I'm thinking about Jesus' words about pruning.

I realize that in order to fully flower – and in late summer/early autumn it is glorious – I must prune my *Clematis terniflora*, or climbing Clematis. Pruning back to the old wood, getting rid of the nasty leftovers of autumn, when I **should** have done this, will encourage new, vigorous growth and lush bouquets of tiny white flowers.

And I think about my *Hydrangea anomala petiolaris*, the climbing Hydrangea that David Shirley fears will pull down the roof of our front porch. That, too, needs pruning to produce healthy growth, more greenery, more flowers. I hope.

In other words, without pruning, these vines will wither, just as Jesus says.

But hold on, this isn't a gardening lesson (and I wouldn't be teaching one, anyway) – we need to tease out Jesus' metaphorical language.

The past few days I've been devouring news articles about the new Legacy Museum in Montgomery, Alabama. In case you haven't been reading about it, it is also called the Lynching Memorial, because a major piece of the museum is a chilling representation of the sinful acts of violence against people of color up into the 1950s. From what I can see it is a powerful, powerful indictment of the white people who actively participated in – or were complicit in – horrifying acts of murder based on the color of the victims' skin. And the actual name of the memorial is The National Memorial for Peace and Justice.

A *Washington Post* article about the memorial was posted in a very positive way on FaceBook. The person posting gave me hope: She, a white woman, was acknowledging the sin of racism that has so stained our nation and she was deeply moved by the memorial. She said it served as a wake-up call to America, pointing out that far too often we white folks simply don't want to talk about institutional racism nor acknowledge white privilege.

Then I started reading the comments that followed this woman's post.

That wasn't a good idea. It raised my blood pressure, I am sure, because I was simply shocked at the ignorance of some people who posted things like, "Well, this is just going to raise the

level of anger." "Why can't people just let the past live in the past?" "How come we can have something like this but can't have our memorials to our Confederate leaders?"

Seriously.

Seriously?

I contend that this memorial and museum are vital to our national consciousness. Far too many high school history books used in public schools gloss over the sin of slavery and make light excuses for the Civil War. Because of our lack of credible education too many people in this country say, "Well, some of the masters were kind to their slaves." Or "What about the African people who sold slaves to the white traders?" Or even worse, "Well, those people were better off in America than they were in Africa." Some commenters called the memorial "race baiting."

Seriously. There are people who believe this.

Because the branches of justice have been pruned from the vine of truth!

Philosopher and author George Yancy has said this about an opinion piece he wrote for the *New York Times* in 2015, "Dear White America:" "Dear White America was a letter of love. And by letter of love I mean that it was a letter that was an invitation for white people to engage honestly with their racism, to be vulnerable and to let go of their 'white innocence'."

Yes. Yancy is yearning for a conversation with and among white people in which the branches of ignorance are pruned away from our national psychic vine. He yearns for branches of honesty and transparency, branches of kindness and compassion.

What I'd like to explore is this possibility: That Christ is the true vine, the origin of all branches, but the plant – the culmination of the branches – is really us individual faithful people; the branches are our characteristics, those aspects of our lives which truly reflect the DNA of the Christ-vine – and the branches that are pruned away are those aspects of our lives which must be discarded if we are to grow into healthy Christians where Christ abides.

In this line of thinking, Christ is the source of all wisdom and all love. Deep love and divine wisdom, which existed before all time, are to be found in Christ Jesus. The love and wisdom which flow through the main root of the vine will, if tended with compassion, flow through the branches. But when a branch says, "Oh, no, my ego is far too important –" or "Oh, no, I cannot let go of material things –" or "Well, surely I am not a racist –" that branch must be pruned away and discarded in order that the branches bearing the fruit of the Spirit may be strengthened and grown into the full incarnation of God's wisdom and God's love.

This is in the Book of Wisdom: "Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit." (Sirach 24:16-17)

I bud forth delights: I bud forth mercy, justice, love, strength, faith. The delights of the Holy Spirit visited upon us mere mortals. The strengths of God becoming *our* strengths. The essence of the faithful reflecting the strength of God.

"My blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit." My blossoms and my fruit: Justice. Compassion. Mercy. Faithfulness. Love.

It seems to me that if we regard Jesus as the source of holy wisdom and Jesus as the true vine, we must think upon the qualities exemplified by Jesus Christ as being the lifeblood of that vine. Jesus welcomed the unwelcome. Jesus spoke up for the marginalized. Jesus healed the sick, mended the broken. Jesus spoke justice and Jesus spoke compassion, because those are qualities of God.

If we are to be the healthy branches of the vine, we, too, will speak justice and compassion, mercy and love. When our egos and our fears get in the way – when one branch becomes so intertwined with the others that it threatens to strangle them – we must allow those branches to be pruned away. We must let them go. We white people must be willing to surrender our power. We must let go selfishness, pride, worship of idols, worship of self, worship of the wrong gods – we must let them be pruned away so that the branches of justice and compassion and love will flower and put forth healthy, life-giving fruit in abundance.

We must acknowledge that there have been some tragic events in our history – I think of the Holocaust, the Inquisition, slavery, anti-Semitism, child labor, the denial of a woman's value and the denial of the value of far too many of God's creatures, discrimination and oppression in the name of Christ Jesus – but even with tragedies tarnishing Christianity, even with a perversion of Holy Scripture that continues to the present day, we are still on a course toward justice, mercy, and love. And every once in a while we – the branches of the vine – every once in a while we have an “aha!” moment: “Oh – right. Love God, love your neighbor. Do justice, love mercy. Care for the poor. Welcome the stranger. *That's* what it's about. We forgot!”

And our society is strengthened and the church is strengthened and we once again have hope in a broken world, light in the darkness, less judgment and more forgiveness, less war and more peace.

We receive grace and we remember.

We remember the wise man of God who lived two thousand years ago and we remember the stories. About the Samaritan who helped a stranger on the road. About the woman who was about to be stoned for adultery when he stopped the men cold. We remember the leper he touched, the leper he healed. The many times he told us to care for the poor. We remember.

And we re-become the branches of Jesus' wisdom, life, and ministry, and we bear the fruit of remembering and the fruit will change the world, bringing the Kingdom of God to our little corner.