

Living Into Resurrection: Blossoming Into New Life

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May, 10, 2009

When we lived in Lansing, every year I looked forward to the second week of May. That was the week our bedroom changed color – to startling, shocking, glowing pink.

The reason for this transformation of color was that we had a flowering crabapple tree just outside our ground-floor bedroom window. It was during the second week of May that this tree's color took on its most dazzling brilliance. This was also the time of year that our daughter had most of her ballet recitals, so we have all kinds of pictures of Mindy in her recital outfit along with her little brother who wanted to be in all of the action. She didn't want her picture taken anywhere else; the vivid pink of the tree provided a perfect backdrop for her various outfits.

As the years went by, though, I noticed something. The tree's colors became less and less vibrant. It wasn't an all at once kind of thing. The color just faded a little bit, a year at a time. I don't know how much more it faded, because we moved here. But I think I know why the color was not as vivid as before. It was because the tree grew too much. It grew up and it grew out, and it was never pruned in such a way that the color came back to its former brilliance.

I think about that tree this time of year, when all of the flowering trees are in full bloom. Especially this year. I do believe that this is the most beautiful spring I have seen since we moved here. It seems like all the flowering trees have come out at the same time, all with their full radiance. A drive around any of the streets in Avon Lake will give you as good a performance as anything you will see on television. It is a wonderful picture of God's good creation on beautiful display – All Things Bright and Beautiful, indeed.

The second week of May has something else which is on radiant display – the affection we have for our mothers. A former colleague of mine said that he remembered when the Presbyterian liturgical calendar comprised of only four days – Christmas, Easter, Boy Scouts Sunday and Mother's Day. We cannot let this day go by without celebrating the unconditional love that mothers give – at least some mothers do. We know we can turn this day into something sappy. I once heard a sermon that began, "It says something about our culture that we have a National Pickle Week but only a Mother's Day..." I don't remember the rest of the sermon because I was too engaged with that thought. Of course we ought to have more than a day to celebrate our mothers. I'm sure they would appreciate it, too.

But thank goodness we do have this one special day. No matter how much we may remember that mothers are human beings, too, complete with all kinds of foibles, most of us have treasured and cherished memories of our mothers. They brought us into the world, and they were the first ones to show us what the love of Jesus looked like in human form. For me, the blossoming of the trees and the love of my Mother go together, because there was a reason my Mom married a guy who would become a landscape nurseryman. It was because she loved trees and plants as much as he did.

This might be the time of the sermon when the preacher goes into all kinds of sappy memories about how great his mother was - and she *was* great. But I have to be honest: My mother and I did not always have such a great relationship. It was filled with all kinds of things that get in the way of any good relationship, with expectations, demands, harsh words going both ways. It is only now, when I

look back and reflect on how she could have done all she did at my age and still take care of three children of 23, 18 and 13 years of age in the same house, that I really marvel at her love and patience.

It's not that she was perfect – she was not, but neither was I, as you all well know. We both carried a lot of dead wood within ourselves. We both needed to have some dead branches cut off from ourselves, and we both needed our good branches to be pruned so that the fruit could be better. But that's the way it is with everyone – even those perfect mothers out there. We all need some trimming and pruning.

When Jesus was getting ready to leave his disciples, he needed to prepare them for life without him. He needed to give them something that would sustain them through the tough days when it would seem that there was no life left in them. So he gave them an image which was familiar to them, and which has remained with us.

He didn't tell them about mothers, but he did tell them that he was the vine and that they were the branches. That image is one that we hear almost every month when we gather for the Lord's Supper and are getting ready to receive the juice. It's a reminder to us that I am not the vine, you are not the vine, the church is not the vine – Jesus is the vine. We are fed and nourished as a community of faith through our relationship with him, and with others in his name. It is our connection with Christ that sustains us, that feeds us, that connects us.

When we remember that, our color and our vibrancy are obvious. People are welcomed, relationships are cherished, the poor are fed. There is an attitude when our connection with Jesus is solid, when we remain in him, as it says in our Good News Bibles. But things can get in the way. Like that flowering crabapple tree on our front yard in Lansing, we can grow too much in other directions and lose our way. We can forget that Jesus is the vine and think that the vine is something else – numbers, people's opinions, going along to get along, national security. Not bad things, just not very good things to be based on. They are not the vine of our lives.

So how do we get our branches pruned, and get back to growing with vibrancy? You know how. We talk about it all the time. It's no secret.

First of all we remember that we are not the vine. The world does not begin and end with our egos. We live in a time and culture where the self is everything, and getting our needs met is the order of the day. It's a radical thing to say that we are not the end all. We are important, we are the beloved of God's Father-like and Mother-like love. But the vine is Jesus. Our source of strength, of courage, of faith, of grace, of peace begins and ends in him.

Secondly, we remember that we are not the only branches of this vine. There are others here as well. A vine with only one branch doesn't look like much. A flowering fruit tree, even if it is an exquisite specimen, does not look nearly as wonderful as it does when it is clustered with others. We need each other for support, for comfort, for correction. No matter what our political opinions are, no matter what our theology is, no matter what our educational level might be – we need each other to grow.

When we first moved into our house we had two azalea bushes in our front yard. They were pretty, but they didn't do much. I wanted them to be more visible. So I took out some other bushes that were in front of them. That would make them shine. But it didn't – they just withered away to nothing. What happened? Those azaleas needed those other bushes to give them the acid they needed to grow bigger and be more beautiful. Those other bushes had what those azaleas needed. Without them, they were nothing.

Being a part of a church can drive you crazy. People seem like they are always at you to do something – like be on the Presbyterian Women Coordinating Team, or in one of the circles, or to do some mission work. We may not always be as good a Christian as we would like to be, but splitting off and doing it alone isn't going to do it. You cannot be a branch apart from the vine, and you cannot be a good branch apart from other branches. We need each other. We need each other to produce that beautiful fruit that can only come when we hang in there together.

The third part of all of this is that we need some help to know what parts of us are dead branches and need to go. We get that from reading Scripture, studying it carefully and joyfully for what it means to be a part of this vine called the body of Christ. Jesus' teachings are always there for us to check out, to make sure we are following in the right way. To just assume that we can know all that by ourselves is foolishness. We are always in need of checking out what God's Word has to say to us. We also get help from reading good, solid devotional material. It doesn't matter whether it is a Presbyterian devotional or a Methodist devotional or a Catholic devotional. What matters is that it brings us closer to the One who is our vine, the One of whom we are but a branch, the One who gives us sustenance and strength and connection.

All of these – remembering that Jesus is the vine, that we need each other, that we need to let God's Word teach us what we need to get rid of – all of these don't happen at once. Just like that crabapple tree blossomed brilliantly and then got too big over time, so we can either find our way or lose it over time. But God gives us time so that we can let the Good Gardener do the pruning and the shaping that will bring forth good growth. We also need to open ourselves to let that growth happen.

A while back, just a couple of years before she died, my Mom and I went for a walk near her apartment in Augusta, Georgia. We had worked out at least most of the dead branch stuff that had kept us from each other, and it was just nice to be together, to walk along the Savannah River, to enjoy each other's company and the relationship God gave us. On this Mother's Day I invite you to take the time to let God work on the vine you are and are becoming; to prune off the dead branches, but also to enjoy the new growth that Jesus is working in you and in others.

Happy Mother's Day. Amen.

Text is John 15:1-10
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