

May 5 – Read John 15:1-5. Israelites often saw themselves as part of a vineyard God tended (cf. Psalm 80:8-18, Isaiah 5:1-7). A golden sculpture of a vine over the porch of the Jerusalem Temple reinforced the image. But when Jesus used that image he made it more personal and more challenging. Only as his followers stayed united to him like branches to a vine, Jesus said, would their lives bear the kind of fruit God sought. If you imagine a story in which one branch from a vine or tree decided that it didn't need the vine, and could "go it alone," you realize that branch would soon wither and die. How does your personal Bible reading, prayer and other spiritual disciplines support your connection to Jesus? In what ways do other Christians help keep you "in Jesus"? Jesus was definite: "A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine." In our high achieving, Type A culture, do you ever find yourself tugged in the direction of thinking you can produce fruit by yourself, that your good intentions and determination are all you need to lead a life pleasing to God? We'll see this week that Jesus did call us to work with him. But given that, why do you believe he said you cannot do it by yourself?

May 7. Read Isaiah 18:4-6, Jeremiah 5:1, 10-11. Some vineyard pruning is relatively random: "excess leaves and tendrils are cut away to encourage greater yield." In our lives, illnesses or accidents may produce a similar kind of "pruning." God doesn't cause those things, but we may learn lessons as we trust God through them. The prophets, however, spoke of very intentional spiritual pruning, in which God called for pruning away branches that "aren't the LORD's." Prophets like Isaiah, Jeremiah and others (e.g. Amos 2:6-8) challenged Israelites to stop acting in ways that betrayed their covenant with God and hurt the weakest of their neighbors. They spoke about pruning branches that aren't the LORD's. When have you seen someone close to you (maybe even yourself) needing to set aside some attitude or behavior that was clearly not what God wanted in their life? Jeremiah challenged a lie that denied the need for change: "They have lied about the LORD and said, 'He'll do nothing!'" "It was a popular prophet who offered the people the hope of peace, security and resolution of the problem. Denial is the path of least resistance." When you discern that something in your life or of someone close to you needs pruning, how tempting do you find it to lapse into denial? How can you avoid that perilous course?

May 8. Read Matthew 5:29-30; Colossians 3:5-10. Jesus clearly taught in his Sermon on the Mount that our mind and heart stray off course before any outward act ever does. “I say to you that everyone who is angry with their brother or sister will be in danger of judgment” (Matthew 5:22). “I say to you that every man who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery in his heart” (Matthew 5:28). The apostle Paul said the pruning it takes to choose a new life in Christ is like taking off and putting on outfits. He listed hurtful traits Christ-followers should “take off” (verses 5, 8). Jesus said your inner being steals, commits adultery or even kills before your body ever does any of those things. That made it clear he wasn’t telling us to literally mutilate our bodies in today’s reading from Matthew. What do you believe Jesus wanted his potent images to teach us about our inner life? What, if anything, might you need to change in your day-to-day life to take Jesus seriously? The apostle Paul wrote to the Christians in Philippi, “From now on, brothers and sisters, if anything is excellent and if anything is admirable, focus your thoughts on these things: all that is true, all that is holy, all that is just, all that is pure, all that is lovely, and all that is worthy of praise” (Philippians 4:8). How many parts of your listening, watching or reading fully live up to that standard? How could adopting Paul’s wisdom help you prune damaging influences out of your life?

May 9. Read Galatians 6:7-9. Last week we read Jesus’ parable that showed the value of being good soil in which the seed God plants can grow strong and fruitful (cf. Mark 4:2-9, 14-20). In today’s reading, the apostle Paul switched the image a bit. He pictured us as the farmers, who need to be careful what we plant in the soil of our lives. His point was that often our choices, rather than things we cannot help, are the source of disappointing life outcomes. In the first part of Galatians 6, Paul talked about relationships, about ways the Galatian Christians could help and uplift one another. Those are choices we control. When have you seen your choices, or those of someone close to you, “sow” one or more negative effects? What have you learned, or can you learn, to bring about better outcomes in the future? Verse 9 said doing good takes focused effort. “The first verb [“get tired”] puts emphasis on losing interest (for example, “spiritless”) and the second [“give up”] on becoming discouraged or relaxing one’s efforts.” Paul knew this can be a spiritual hazard. Have you ever gotten tired of doing good? If so, what helped renew your energy to bear good fruit by blessing others?

May 10. Read James 3:8-18. We are virtually certain that Jesus’ brother James (cf. Matthew 13:55, 1 Corinthians 15:7, Galatians 1:19) wrote this letter. Many of its phrases echoed Jesus’ teachings. Today’s reading reminds us that discerning the quality of the fruit the “grapevine” of our lives produces is not deeply mysterious or difficult. James laid out clear examples of what both bad and good fruit looks like. James 3:13-15 said “bitter jealousy” and “selfish ambition” are bad fruit; humility good and wise fruit. Have you ever seen jealousy or selfish ambition damage relationships between people? How does humility protect against these hurtful ways of thinking? Do you believe you can act with confidence (in any setting) out of humility rather than pride? What attitudes or actions does it take to make that a reality? Prayerfully review the harmful qualities James listed and the ones he said come “from above.” Which are most characteristic of your life? How can you direct your effort, working with God, to make the wisdom from above more and more the dominant characteristics in all your everyday relationships?