

Karen Hollis - Sermon

John 15:1-8

April 29, 2018

In northern California, in the town of Vina, there is a vineyard that is tended by the monks of the New Clairvaux Abbey. These Cistercian monks have been wine makers since the 12th Century CE in France. They brought their expertise across the ocean and in 1955 built a home and a life around this vineyard. Many monks spend their working hours tending the vineyards all year round. In the spring the vine grower monitors the new shoots as they emerge from the vine, making sure each vine has the right amount, not too many, and watching carefully for signs of unwanted pests and fungi. As the season shifts into summer, the vines grow rapidly and have to be trellised and guided into order. Left to their own devices, the vines would, of course, go every which way, tangle with each other and make it impossible, without cutting it all out and starting over, to get the most out of the vine. The vine grower takes care to guide the vine so that it can receive optimum light by thinning leaves; it's also important, in the interest of creating the sweetest grapes, to thin out some of the fruit itself, so as to not exhaust the vine. Even after the bulk of trellising is done, little bits of pruning and trellising continues, in preparation for harvest in the fall. The biggest challenge as harvest time comes closer is predators, because grapevines have evolved over thousands of years to attract animals to the fruit! So the vine grower has to in a sense work against nature to protect the grapes. After the harvest, into the winter months, the vine grower might plant a cover crop, like clover, which attracts beneficial insects and creates a nice mat on the vineyard floor. Then of course comes the most critical piece of this season's work: pruning. During the process, "the pruner considers the growth of the past, the vine's current condition, and the anticipated and desired growth for the upcoming season."¹ "The vine-[grower] is never closer to the vine, taking more thought over its long-term health and productivity, than when [she] has the knife in [her] hand."

Just as the vine growers at the New Clairvaux vineyard trellis the grapes for the growing season, in a human way, the trellis their lives through a Rule of Life known as the Rule of St. Benedict. The word "rule" indeed comes from the Greek word for trellis. St. Benedict wrote his rule in the 6th Century, aware even at that time of the need for a guide for one's life that keeps one's faith in God at the centre. The Rule includes prayer, community life, hospitality, physical work, and study. If you visited the Abbey, you would be invited to the 7 daily offices, as they are known, which are essentially a pattern of daily prayer. The first is Vigils at 3:30am – if you're ever

¹ <https://www.mcevoyranch.com/about/farming-practices/seasonal-vineyard-care>, visited April 25, 2018.

awake at that hour, know that you are not alone, the monks are awake, keeping watch in the wee hours of the morning; next is Lauds at 6:30, a chant at the break of day, followed immediately by 7am daily Mass; Terce is observed with the ringing of a bell mid-morning after the start of the work day, during which they pause to remember the work of the Holy Spirit; Sext (with a T on the end) is prayed just before the mid-day meal; then in the mid-afternoon the community gathers for None to remember Jesus' self-giving; Vespers is relatively well known in the broader church as a gathering of evening prayer; and finally the day closes with Compline and those gathered ask God to watch over them during the night.² Every day, between these punctuation marks, there is time for work, study, rest and relaxation, and community time. In addition to Sundays as a rest day from work, the monks get one day off from this rule of life per month. Living this Rule (trellis) keeps them intentional about focusing the rhythms of their lives on the movement of God. The monastery sees part of their role to be a place of alignment and centeredness on God, support for abiding in God, for lay people in the midst of a crazy and chaotic culture that loves distraction. In this way, it's a lovely place to visit, and particularly for introverts who love silence, visiting a place like this can be incredibly restorative – I like to dip into this way of life and then re-enter my own life.

But the more important question is how to integrate some of this intentionality into our lives and make it relevant. How can we, outside of this ordered life, shape a life that is intentionally present with God, or abiding in God? While there are an infinite number of variations on a Rule of Life, to create one's own, personal Rule of Life³, there are common elements one might consider including:

- Prayer
- Rest
- Work/physical activity
- Relationships

Prayer might include scripture, a walk on one of our many trails, study, silence/solitude. Play and recreation, lingering over a cup of coffee, napping and Sabbath would all fall under the rest category. For work and activity one might want to include mission & outreach, church committees, exercise, chopping kindling, maintaining property. Finally, relationships obviously include family, community, pets, and not to forget ourselves. A rule of life includes a combination of all these things (prayer, rest, work, relationships) to keep us balanced and connected.

² <https://www.newclairvaux.org/who-we-are>, visited April 25, 2018.

³ Emotionally Healthy Spirituality by Pete Scuzzero, 2006, pp. 189-206

To create one's own personal rule of life, one might want to consider the things that come naturally. If we walk on a regular basis, we can take that practice and apply it to our Rule of Life. Same thing with tending our relationships with spouses, extended family, connecting with friends – we can easily apply that to the personal trellis we're constructing. There are several among us who attend a regular Bible study or book study group – this gets you that connection with community and tapping into scripture all in one! The key to a Rule of life is first to be intentional about the specific shape of the trellis – walking, PHC lunch, family, singing, study at lunch 3 times a week, rest on Mondays – then to notice where and how it is challenging us, for instance, directions where we might grow or places where the vine grower might be pruning.

This is a challenging concept, being pruned by God, because pruning hurts. At our Tuesday Bible study we talked about the difference between pruning, sacrificing, and tragedy. Pruning is not giving up something we love and brings us joy because we think it will please God. Pruning is not losing a loved one in a tragic accident. Pruning might be letting go of a friend because the relationship has run its course; pruning might be letting go of one career for another. I shared with the Bible study that selling my horse felt like a pruning. It was hugely painful to give her up, but I also needed to put my energy in other places in order to follow my path of becoming on my walk with God. Prunings large and small help to keep us on track – I like to think I make the choices in my life, but more and more I find the right choices for my life seem to be the ones that God blesses and keep me aligned with my purpose. The pruning and trellis work together to help us be our true selves, grounded, connected in community and abiding in, or present with God.

In the Jewish tradition this is known as mitzvah, or the state of being connected. Mitzvahs are commands in the Hebrew Bible (our Old Testament). A participant in a mitzvah-based society must continue participating in ongoing study of the commands, because one cannot perform a command unless they learn about them first, and then they must continue learning as applications of mitzvahs change. When one performs a mitzvah, it can be known as a good deed, a way of serving one's community in obedience to God. It's a layered system of obedience to God, developing the self and learning God's word and way in people.

The Jewish faith also has an old tradition called Midrash, which is essentially stories about the stories of scripture. Sometimes it's additional information about a particular passage or it's a parallel story to the one that was included in the biblical cannon. I'm going to close this morning with a story of midrash, called, The Fox in the Vineyard:

A sly fox passed a lovely vineyard. A tall, thick fence surrounded the vineyard on all sides. As the fox circled around the fence, he found a small hole in the fence, barely large enough for him to push his head through. The fox could see what luscious grapes grew in the vineyard, and his

mouth began to water. But the hole was too small for him. So what did the sly fox do? He fasted for three days, until he became so thin that he managed to slip through the hole.

Inside the vineyard, the fox began to eat to his heart's content. He grew bigger and fatter than ever before. Then he wanted to get out of the vineyard. But alas! The hole was too small again. So what did he do? He fasted for three days again, and then just about managed to slip through the hole and out again.

Turning his head towards the vineyard, the poor fox said: "Vineyard, O vineyard! How lovely you look, and how lovely are your fruits and vines. But what good are you to me? just as I came to you, so I leave you . . ."

And so, the sages say, it is also with this world. It is a beautiful world, but—in the words of King Solomon, the wisest of all men—just as humans comes into this world empty handed, so we leaves it. Only the Torah (or scripture) we studied, the mitzvot (connection to God and community by following God's commands) we performed, and the good deeds we practiced are the real fruits which we can take with us.

Indeed it is only the way we live that is lasting when we leave this world. So God, teach us how to live. Thanks be to God!