

*A sermon preached by the Reverend Michael Anderson Bullock, Rector  
St. Martin's-in-the-Fields Episcopal Church, Columbia, South Carolina*

*Easter 6 (1 May 2005):*

*Acts 17:22-31; 1 Peter 3:8-18; John 15:1-8*

## **On Being One of God's Roses**

***I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me, and I in him, is the one who bears much fruit, for a part from me you can do nothing.***

*John 15:5*

I began growing roses in 1984. When the parish purchased a house for us to live in that was built in 1810 (a house, which subsequent to our living in it, became the rectory), I found two badly neglected roses in an overgrown patch in the backyard. Much to my surprise and delight, with some careful tending, new life emerged; and I even got blossoms. I have been hooked on roses ever since.

When we left Massachusetts for north-central New York, I brought my two resurrected roses along.

I rooted them in five gallon pales of earth and moved them and my family – courageously -- beyond the Hudson River into the wilds of America. We moved in mid-April, where in New England the weather was mild. Yet, as a harbinger of the changes that were to come, two days after we arrived in our new home, it started to snow. Having left my roses outside, they were frost-bitten in a week and died.

My sense of despair was cushioned by the fact that I had received two lovely gifts from parishioners in Massachusetts. One was from the Senior Warden of the parish, the first female senior warden in the history of that pre-Revolutionary War church. In our work together in that place, we had become bonded partners, and when I left for my next post, she sent me a note that contained a check for \$100. The note said: "You must use this money to start a new rose garden in your new home." It was a lovely, most thoughtful, and, above all, a tender gift, for she knew that I needed to have the roses as a way to keep my spiritual and emotional balance.

The other gift also came from one of the former flock, and it, too, pertained to gardening. It was a book that described various types of gardens from the distinct regions of America. For instance, there was a fabulous description of a desert garden from the southwest. But I especially appreciated this book because its contents were not simply pictures of these gardens, but it told about the plants and even provided a reference bibliography, where more information could be gained and even plants could be ordered to start one's own plot.

It was from this book that I learned about heritage roses: those old, classical roses from a century and more ago that form the basis from which all roses spring. I was fascinated to learn about the genesis of roses, some of which the Romans grew, not to mention the ancient Chinese. Beyond the history, however, the traditionalist in me was struck because the modern versions of roses – for the most part – all have the same shape and form; they lack that alluring smell; and they are very fussy when it comes to cold weather and bugs.

As I read on and learned more, I realized that I was coming up with a set of criteria for the roses that I would grow. I was going to grow a heritage rose garden. So, my roses had to have an old lineage and legacy. I wanted to have a small but consistent family tree of roses that marked not only the various basic species but also indicated some of the evolution of the rose – a kind of rosarian’s version of the biblical “begats.” In addition, all the roses needed to have a scent; they had to bloom more than once (which is not a very common trait among the old roses), and because I was living in the tundra, they had to be winter hearty (which most of the new roses are not).

With each hour spent on thinking about the garden, I became more enthusiastic about the enterprise. And when I discovered in the bibliography that there was a heritage rose supplier in southern Ontario, Canada (about a two hour drive north from where we lived), I figured that if roses could grow in Canada, they could grow in my yard! So, using my former Warden’s gift, I placed an order and began my first, intentional rose garden.

When we moved to South Carolina and bought our Brentwood Drive house, there were many challenges to be faced, not the least of which was whether I could start a new rose garden here. (We don’t call it “Forest Acres” for nothing; and I always battle to get enough sun on the garden.) Moreover, no one had lived in the house for over three years. In terms of thinking about a garden,

I was somewhat overwhelmed by the fact that I had inherited a sandlot of pine seedlings.

It was one thing to clear the land and clean it up; it was another to figure out how anything would grow in that ancient beach. Raised beds were the answer, filled with “Dixie Mix,” a locally blended combination of soils that promised me wonderful results. Then, it was time to order my roses and to make them a home in a transformed yard.

At first, I was tempted to replicate what I had before, but that would not do -- either for the rose garden or for St. Martin’s. So, I did some more research. What I pursued, in particular, was a new type of rose that I had encountered in the latter stages of my New York gardening. The new type of rose was the product of a famous English rosarian, by the name of David Austin; and the name of the new species was the “English Rose.”

The English Rose immediately caught my attention because Mr. Austin had combined all the wonderful traits of the old roses with the helpful traits of the new roses. So, the products resulted in the many different blossom forms and scents of the oldies-but-goodies, along with their heartiness and the repeat blooming habits of the modern roses.

For me, this was the perfect rose, and it is what my South Carolina garden grows nine to ten months of the year. I recognize also that such a rose reflects what my vision and perspective of life is: a combination of the strengths of the traditional with an openness to what is new.

Now I tell you all this because the roses are more than flowers to me, although I can think of no other plant that provides such stunning beauty for such a long period of time, year after year. But, as I have just indicated, roses also remind me of my own life and my own vocation and my own spirituality.

Botanically, roses are amazing things in that they are almost always a combination of an old and very hearty root stock, onto which a specific cultivar (a kind of rose) is grafted. The creative and necessary symbiosis between the roots and the stems makes both for the plant's life and its particular beauty. How much like our own lives is this? How telling it is that without a sturdy root system there can be no blossom, no fruit? And as our gospel reading mentions today, so it is with us in our spiritual connections with God. Why do we wither and die so frequently? Why are our lives not more fruitful? Take a look at what passes for our roots and in what they have been planted.

*I am the vine, you are the branches. The one who abides in me, and I in him, is the one who bears much fruit, for a part from me you can do nothing.*

The junction between the root system and the cultivar's stem is called the union. It is the golf ball-sized section of the plant that is just above the soil line, where the real life of the rose resides. In fact, you can always tell when a rose is doing well and raring to go. You will see green-stemmed shoots of mahogany-colored leaves emerging from the union. They are called basil stems. This is an indication that the bush is not only alive and growing but that it is also on its way to becoming

what it can become.

*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.*

*John 15:4*

The union is the place where the rose bush "abides." The junction of root and stem finds its life, its purpose, its energy there. In the life of the church and of the people of God, the union's abiding is called "Communion," the place where presence and prayer come together. It is where we meet the reality of God's presence, and take that life-giving sustenance into ourselves and blossom.

Yet, in those times of doubt and fear, whether it has to do with my own personal life or my life with the church – or both! – I have found myself in my garden, staring at my roses' union. In the union, I am reminded that this is the place where I am called to live, where we all are called to live, where the roots and the possibilities come together. And when the stems are faltering, when the blossoms are few and the thorns are thick, in my

mind's eye I try to see beneath the soil level where the union is to the place where the roots live. And I imagine those roots straining to go deeper. I can feel them laboring into the soil to bring the nutrients into the system. I can hear them toiling to move that sustenance and that hope upward through the stems, trying to make a difference. And in this imagery, I am reminded that is all that I can do. It is all any of us can do.

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

John 15:1

In the last thirty or so years, we have all become aware of the allure and promise of what is labeled: "natural." In reaction to the harsh and at times dangerous manipulation of the earth, "natural" has stood for what is good, what is proper in life. Yet, just because something is "natural" does not automatically make it "good" or "proper," and roses regularly remind me of this.

For instance, left to their own devices, roses (as with many other plants and trees – and human beings) just get "leggy." Their stems shoot naturally out toward the sun, to the extent that they do their natural thing so much that they grow in an undisciplined manner and become susceptible to the wind's ravages or more than likely they become so heavy in and of themselves that they simply break off at the union, risking the health of the entire plant.

So, it is necessary to prune roses, to give them shape and direction. Yet, pruning is quite different from hacking away at unwanted growth. No, pruning a rose requires knowing how to look for the possibilities of new life and how to make the cuts that facilitate that life. The result of proper pruning not only keeps the rose from expending its energy in unproductive and even fatal ways; pruning also actually causes the rose to continue to bloom beautifully.

As with many such things, there is a mystique surrounding pruning a rose. For the most part, it is a lot of hogwash. People will say that you have to find the first leaflet of five leaves, the one below the old blossom or damage, as the place to prune. And they are right, but that gets to be a little too "high church" for me. What is the truth is that you look on the place where the stem and the leaves meet. And you look for the place where the little "eyes" are nestled in the crotch between the stem and the leaf. You can always see them, if you are careful. That's where the bush is preparing a new blossom, and you should cut about an eighth to a quarter of an inch above that eye, on a diagonal. And in about a week, a new blossom will swell in its new beginning. (Rudy Menke, eat your heart out!)

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

Most of us can fathom the necessity and wisdom of pruning roses. It is one of those great mysteries of life that in doing so we produce more life, stronger life, more fruitful life. Yet, when it comes to our own lives, pruning takes on a different tone, and I, for one, can understand this. For as with roses, pruning human life without knowledge and awareness can be oh-so-destructive and painful.

Too many of us have been pruned in such a manner. Too many of us have pruned others in such a manner. In reaction to the resulting pain and destruction, we are tempted to put the pruning shears away and to let things go. But this is simply reactivity; it is neither a helpful nor a mature response.

In the spiritual life that is expressed in the Bible and in the tradition of living that biblical faith, repentance is the equivalent to pruning. As in the case of pruning, repentance, too, has been misinterpreted and misused. It has been the cause of a great deal of injury and destruction, ostensibly in the name of God and at the hands of the church. Yes, pruning is necessary; but we can do the wrong thing for the right reason, if we are not careful. Spiritual and emotional pruning are not the same as hacking at growth.

In places like St. Martin's, repentance is given very little actual credence. For the most part, we have a tendency to think that as enlightened Anglican Christians – so liberal and sophisticated in our ways – that we no longer need to deal with repentance. We did that once, we say. Now, we are graduates of such fundamentalistic stuff. Or for those of us who are refugees from other, “less enlightened” Christian traditions, we have fled to the Episcopal Church for asylum from such propagations of guilt and sin. In either case, as with a vaccination, our tendency is to believe that once is enough when it comes to the issue of such things. After all, why dwell on the negative and ruin a perfectly nice morning, when God is love and we are all nice people?

*If a person does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.*

*John 15:6*

I trust that you remember what repentance is. (At the very least, we do talk about it during Advent.) It means to “turn around,” to face the other direction so that we can see God. It refers not only to a changing of our viewpoint in order to see what needs seeing; it also means to have a transformation of thought, of attitude, of life. As one theologian has written: Repentance means coming to our senses. Therefore, it is not so much something you do as something that happens. True repentance spends less time looking at the past and saying, “I’m sorry,” than to the future and saying, “Wow!”<sup>11</sup>

How often do you say “Wow!” about your life and really mean it? As an individual, of what do you, (of what do I) need to repent in order to be so thankful? Most likely, we will find the answer to this uncomfortable pruning question precisely where we experience the most fear and pain in our lives.

*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples.*

John 15: 7-8

What would it be like if we could sit down with one another and admit of what it is that we need to repent and, thereby, take personal responsibility for what keeps us from real fruitfulness? Under these circumstances, for instance, how long would we be able to see each other as “red states” and “blue states”? Not for very long, because we would see and appreciate how we are, in fact, called to live at the union of the roots and the stems. And while each of us may prefer specific colored blossoms and particular floral scents, we could still join one another in promoting the growth.

Or put another way: In your prayer life, do you ask God for things that you need and experience no response? Perhaps the issue that you and I fail to realize is that what God wants first and foremost to give to us is himself. God wants us to ask for his abiding presence with us and in us and through us. God wants us to enter into the union of our life, into the Communion of our life; and from this sacred experience of divine presence, the rest of our requests and needs take care of themselves.

Abiding. Communion. Pruning. Fruitfulness.

This is the time for new life, for new growth, for blossoms – in our own gardens and most specifically in our own personal lives, and in the life of this church.

*By God's grace, St. Martin's purpose is to equip Christ's disciples: To Love; To Grow; To Serve.*

It is spring time. Moreover, it is Eastertide. And the fact is that Christ is risen. Alleluia! Amen.

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[\[1\]](#) Frederick Buechner, Wishful Thinking, page 79.