

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Cycle B
Acts of the Apostles 9:26-31
Psalm 22:26-27, 28, 30, 31-32
1 John 3:18-24
John 15:1-8
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In her book, Holy the Firm, the great Catholic essayist, Annie Dillard, shares a memory from a class she taught to aspiring writers. She asked her students which of them wanted to give their lives and be writers. They all raised their hands. Dillard writes, “Why do I want them to mean it? And then I tried to tell them what the choice must mean: you can’t be anything else. You must go at your life with a broadaxe...They thought I was raving again. It’s just as well.” You see, for Dillard, writing isn’t something you can do in your spare time. It’s a vocation that requires tremendous sacrifice. Writers must use that broad axe to cut away from their lives even things that are good in themselves but extraneous to the work, so that in the end, a writer is simply a wick with one end thrust into the material world, with the other end casting light.

Dillard’s broad axe imagery is probably inspired by an extended metaphor that Jesus uses in our Gospel this evening. He compares his Heavenly Father to a grape vine grower. Jesus himself is the vine. The disciples are the branches. He tells them that the vine grower *takes away* every branch that does not bear fruit, and every branch that *does* bear fruit he *prunes* so that it will bear more fruit. That’s where the broad axe comes in. (Maybe pruning shears would be less intimidating.) But the point remains the same, namely, what matters is bearing as much fruit as possible. A branch might be lush and verdant. It might have the prettiest

leaves in the whole vineyard, but if it doesn't bear fruit, it going to end up on the brush pile. Another branch might appear stunted and ugly. It might be the vineyard equivalent of Charlie Brown's Christmas tree, but if it bears fruit, it's doing what it's *for*. That's all that matters. In the end, God is interested in *fruit*, not foliage. And so it is with us. When young Brian Doyle first went to his father and told him he had decided to be a writer, his Dad replied, "So, what have you written today?" In other words, "Go bear fruit."

This weekend, the senior class here at the University of Portland will graduate. As they look ahead, their futures are replete with possibilities. They might do any number of fascinating, important things. My prayer for them is that they will have the courage and grace to choose a path and throw themselves into it with passion and discipline. If I may switch imagery, life is like a river. If the water of a river is allowed to meander into innumerable streams it becomes little more than a marsh. Only if some of these alternative channels are closed off does the water flow in a particular direction with real force. I'm reminded of Friedrich Nietzsche's insistence that the creation of anything worthwhile requires "obedience over a long period of time in a single direction." (Beyond Good and Evil, 188) (Now there's a fellow who doesn't get quoted in a lot of homilies.)

Years before his eventual death, Isaac Newton retired from mathematics to devote his life to writing theology, which was a shame, because he was better at math. Long after he had retired from the field, a particular mathematical problem was gripping the best minds in Europe. The problem had been posed by one of the Bernoulli brothers, probably Johann. It went like this: if you have two points A and B, with B below and to the right of A, what track could you build connecting them that

would allow a ball dropped at A to reach B in the shortest amount of *Time*? (Hint: it's not a straight line.) On a whim, an audacious young graduate student brought the problem to Isaac Newton. The old man read the problem, and told the student to come back in the morning. When the student returned, Newton handed him the solution. The student sent Newton's solution to Bernoulli without attribution. Bernoulli read it and said, "Ah, I recognize the paw prints of the lion."

That story sends chills down my spine. What Bernoulli recognized was the particular genius of Isaac Newton – the fruit of the unique intellectual instrument that Newton had forged through decades of disciplined creative endeavor. Our graduating students have spent years discovering and exploring their own God-given gifts. With the help of our faculty and staff they have evolved their own characteristic ways of leaning into a world that is crying out for their unique contributions. They have forged and honed their instruments. Now, with deep affection and a profound sense of anticipation, we loose them on the world. It's not called "commencement" for nothing. May they keep a firm grasp on the vine, and bear much fruit.