

Province IV Synod  
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It is a joy to welcome you to Kanuga. I am honored to be with you, to host you, and with the incredible team that makes this land home, to share this gathering place with you as you begin your final lap of preparation for General Convention this summer.

Kanuga exists as a sanctuary for your spirit, and since 1928, we have grown into one of the nation's largest conference and camp centers. Indeed, we are the largest such facility associated with The Episcopal Church. Hosting over 25,000 people each year, in historic cottages, our renovated inn, and through Camp Kanuga, Camp Bob, and Mountain Trail Outdoor School, we stand ready as a place of radical hospitality. As I often remind our team, we are not here to be a place of accommodation like the vision of Conrad Hilton. No, we are here to celebrate the person that happens to walk onto this sacred land, to foster an environment of transformation and radical hospitality so that the person God created can find safety in living as the person God called into being.

So whoever you are and wherever you come from, I hope that this gathering place speaks to you in body, mind, and soul so that the person knit together in your mother's womb can find life while set apart here.

Yet I also know you have business – preparation and work that must be done. I pause here to reflect that, when I accepted this invitation, I did not know that a royal couple across the pond would change the course of our Church. But since he is here, we should thank our Presiding Bishop for expanding the boundaries of love and making clear the mission of who we are.

Now, if you did not catch it, that was a homiletical device to get over the butterflies of speaking to such an august group. But did you hear these lessons! These lessons could not be more perfect for your work and preparation. For indeed, there is a fair amount of pruning that needs to be done.

I know that I am preaching to the choir, but your challenge is to see your power and privilege for the vines of power and privilege may be where God is asking you to prune. Our canonical structure and legislative process is not adaptive to mission, is not as nimble as discipleship, and has become in many cases a web of bureaucracy that is inaccessible to most people in the pew let alone people who are at Starbucks or yoga on a Sunday morning, there reading the NY Times or sweating it out, seeking acceptance.

It is our entangled lack of pruning that has made the Church a polarized, at times inept, irrelevant sounding board that appears more like a debate on CNN or Fox News than a bearer of goodness and authenticity. Branches in the Church have not been bearing fruit for ages, yet we have not pruned them because we are afraid of tough love, of trimming for new growth budding forth. We are so good at being Episcopalians, people who have always done it this way, we cannot discern where our very life has hindered others from their own life in love. We like our “Old Vine Zinfandel” so much that we cannot taste and see that it has become infidel.

We are so entangled by what we have done that we often cannot behold our Lord saying, “Behold, I am doing a new thing.” But in the ears of John’s beloved people when these scriptures were first written, they would have heard so differently than most of us. Because that phrase, “I am the vine, you are the branches” would have triggered their Greek, Hellenistic vocabulary. “Ego eimi hey ‘ampelos.” “Ego eimi,” the code word for God, God’s name in the Greek translation of the Hebrew scriptures, God’s name at the burning bush. God’s name on Mount Sinai.

The whole point of this passage is that “I am who I am” is not some arbitrary deity that comes along and wrathfully trims the branches. No, this is the God that tells us God’s name. “I am who I am.” The God of relationship. Mutuality. Solidarity. The process of pruning is not about wrathful judgment on the part of God, but about our abiding in God’s love so that in love we trim the vines, so that in love we become the people we were and are created to be, inviting all people into such radical love in a community defined not by our sameness but by our difference. Because in love, in revealing who we are, each and every one of us, the image of God is expanded and love explodes.

In the chapter right before this reading, Jesus says “Do not let your hearts be troubled.” Thomas, God I love him, I think he was the first Episcopalian: doubting, agnostic. Thomas says, “Hey, we don’t know where you are going.”

Jesus, “Ego eimi ‘a odos,’ “I am the way, the path, the door.” This is to say, together, who we are, in our multiplicity of being is the way. Then, Philip comes along, “Just show us the way and we will be satisfied.” Sounds a lot like a senior warden or vestry to me. And then that phrase we so love to hear, “I will not leave you orphaned.” “I am who I am” is not going to let you wither. “I am who I am” is not going to leave you alone.

So then, the third character in the chapter comes along, Judas, saying “Well then why aren’t you going to show this to the whole world?” In other words, can’t I just sit in my pew or on my committee and let you do it? And Jesus responds even to the one who will betray him saying “I am who I am” will not abandon – even you.

“I am who I am” will send the Advocate, “I am who I am” will give you Peace, and I’m going to trust you, YOU, with the branches of my movement, so that you can always trim them for growth, so that the ever expanding love of God can reach to new places where weeds and gnarly overgrowth have strangled and forbidden the expansion of God’s love to all God’s

children. In other words, by the time we get to the vines, this is not some angry old man God sitting up in heaven with a long beard sipping old vine zinfandel but an intimate, incarnate, bodily God, loving us and trusting us to do the hard work of trimming so that love can explode in the vineyard.

“For as the rain comes down, and the snow from heaven,  
And do not return there,  
But water the earth,  
And make it bring forth and bud,  
That it may give seed to the sower  
And bread to the eater,  
11 So shall My word be that goes forth from My mouth;  
It shall not return to Me void,  
But it shall accomplish what I please,  
And it shall prosper *in the thing*  
*[in the people]*  
*[in the thing]*  
*[in the institution]* for which I sent it.”

The question before you, the question before all of us who should not have troubled hearts, who have not been abandoned, who know the way, who have the Advocate, who know peace and love, the question is about our power and privilege that need pruning so that love can increase. And while you all are called to a canonical process, the Canons are not our mission. That is hard for me to say as a lawyer and priest in front of my own bishop who I suppose could write me up right now. But these are precarious times in which half-truths and innuendo, forget that, non-truths and make believe, rule of the day.

People are scared. Anxious. Depressed. Loneliness is the chief preoccupation of life.

What needs to be pruned is anything that prevents us from expanding the boundaries of our hearts, from expanding the boundaries of love because it is in our difference, in our multiplicity, in our need for one another that the image of God’s love will be made more manifest. “I am who I am” needs all of us together in love to be made present in this broken and fractured world so desperately needing to be loved.

The Church needs to prune away every branch that distances the lonely from the love of God. The Church needs to prune away every vine that makes people feel orphaned. The Church needs to prune away every overgrowth that does not celebrate the depth of God’s love in all people. And my brothers and sisters, declining Sunday attendance, abysmal Sunday School, check writing mission, and wishing for the good old days is not only gazing in the rearview mirror, it is fertilizing the wrong vines. It is growing the wrong vineyard.

Because this God, this bodily, messy, in the flesh God did not leave us orphaned. Gave us an Advocate. Granted peace and love. And even told us her name.

Indeed, it is time to take out some shears and trim some branches. Not in anger. Not in frustration. Not wishing for the good old days. No, it is time to trim some branches to love. Because if the world has ever needed this movement, it has never needed it more than right now.

In preparation for this sermon, I searched the Constitution and Canons for the word "love." I could not find it. I propose an amendment! Or better yet, a shift in attitude. As you go to Austin next month, I ask you to trim some branches and let love have the day for the dignity of every human being.

So I end as I began: what power and privilege are you willing to give up so that there are no more orphans, no more oppressed, no more foreigners, no more lines in the sand, no more who's in and who's out.

Let's get back to cultivating a rich and inviting vineyard so that the chalices of the world can flow freely with love.