

“Let’s prune the rosebushes.” It seemed like a fine request for a recent, beautiful day. I had never pruned rosebushes, but I am always willing to learn. (SLIDE of overgrown bushes) I was handed gloves, long pruning shears, a wheelbarrow, and the following instructions: “Cut off anything growing toward the center and anything that is touching another branch.”

Now, I am a well-educated, confident woman so I threw on my gloves, took my pruning shears, and went for it. As I started really looking at the first bush and try to decide what to cut and what to leave, I started thinking about how much this exercise reminded me of the season of Lent. (BLACK)

Lent is the 40-day period that leads to Easter Sunday. It is a season where we are encouraged to look closely at our lives and figure out what needs to be pruned so that we might live more fully and abundantly. Like rosebushes our lives get piled up with stuff. There is the physical stuff that we own that accumulates as the years go by. There is the emotional baggage that we carry with us and can choke our psyche. The rosebush of our lives gets crowded with things that consume our time, our attention, our energy, our finances, our mental and physical and spiritual well-being. And Lent is a season where the church asks us to really examine all the areas of our lives and prune out anything and everything that keeps us from growing into the fullness of who God created us to be.

This evening I would like to share with you some of the lessons I learned in rosebush pruning and how they relate to our Holy Season of Lent.

To begin with: (SLIDE OF SHEERS) pruning takes courage, and it can hurt. When I first started cutting out the branches of the rosebush I had a voice in my head that was screaming: “You are going to kill this plant!”. And I took the smallest cut of the smallest branch. I was reluctant and I did not want to remove anything that would hurt the plant. It took me a while to warm up and feel confident to make significant cuts to the plant. And let me tell you, as I started reaching into the bush to cut off this branch or that one, I got scratched and poked at every turn. Even with the gloves on, my

wrists were all scratched up and the number of thorns that I had to physically remove out of my arm and sweater were countless. (BLACK)

Our Lenten season can feel like this, too. My family always gives up something fairly insignificant for Lent. This year it is Dunkin Donuts for me as I am trying to reduce my caffeine, sugar, and expenditures. The boys are giving up soda. But this year I am hoping to do more pruning than that.

Pope Francis has invited us to a deeper Lenten fast. (SLIDE of quote) He says “Consider fasting from hurting words, to say kind words. Fasting from sadness, to be filled with gratitude. Fasting from anger, to be filled with patience. Fasting from pessimism, to be filled with hope. Fasting from worries, to have trust in God. Fasting from complaints, to contemplate simplicity. Fasting from pressures, to be prayerful. Fasting from bitterness, to fill your hearts with joy. Fasting from selfishness, to be compassionate to others. Fasting from grudges, to be reconciled. Fasting from words, to be silent and listen.” (BLACK)

These are the types of Lenten fasts that, while painful and would require courage to tackle, could bring about a transformation of heart and life, and would prune out the things that choke life and open us to that which will produce an abundant and full life.

The next thing I learned in my first-time rosebush pruning session is that more needs to be removed than we think. Like I said, I went for it. I thought I had thoroughly removed everything that needed to be removed from this bush. In fact, I thought I had over done it and had possibly put the plant at real risk. And then the more seasoned gardener came in behind me and did his work. Within a few minutes the bush looked like this (SLIDE OF PRUNED BUSH). I was mortified but was told that the plant had “to be fully opened to the sun in order to grow”.

My friends we too need to create and live lives that are fully open to the Son (point to cross). Not the sun (sky) but the Son (cross). And in order for that to happen we, I believe, need to do more pruning than we might realize. Pastor Gina shared recently that the average person watches five hours of television a day. Let’s do some pruning. Debt is weighing on individuals and families in destructive ways. Let’s do some pruning. The average American now works 50 hours a week instead of the

traditional 40 while reporting that they are burnt out and over stressed. Let's do some pruning. We are in debt, not caring for our health, stressed, divided, and exhausted. Prune, prune, prune. (BLACK)

God, throughout Scripture, is leading people into a fuller life that is steeped in wholeness and joy, love and peace, hope and abundance. And God wants that for you, too. What if we as a church used this 40-day season ahead of us to be like the rosebush and to courageously prune out that which chokes out the sun and doesn't cause us to grow into our fullness.

To prune our lives thoroughly, we must identify and name the things that are choking us. We have to look closely at our various life branches and prayerfully discern if they are helping us or holding us back.

As we examine our days, our months, our years, and the entirety of the lives we have created, we are then called to repent, to turn away from the things that harm us and turn towards the things of God. The word repent has gotten a bad rap but that is what it means—turn away from the dark and turn toward the light. Turn away from the bad and turn toward the good. Turn away from the unholy and turn toward the holy. That is how we prune our lives so that we can find sacred abundance.

This work of Lenten pruning begins today with the holy day called Ash Wednesday. Today we remember that we come from ashes and to ashes we will one day return. Today we look our mortality in the face and ask ourselves the deep questions of whether or not we are living this gift of an earthly life, well and abundantly. Today is the day we remember that life, even a long life, is relatively short and that one day all that will exist of us is our legacy. Ash Wednesday is the day in the Christian year where we are invited to remember our finiteness and then humbly seek a more complete life based in Gospel living.

Author John O'Donohue (SLIDE OF QUOTE) writes: "Decide carefully how you now can live the life you would love to look back on from your deathbed." I love that. And that for me speaks powerfully to what this day is truly all about. Look at the rosebush of your life and make decisions today about what you need to prune so that

when you are transitioning from this life to the next, you will look back and know that you lived and grew and thrived under the direction of the Son.

Tonight, as you come forward to receive the mark of the ashes, remember. (SLIDE OF CROSS) Remember you came from dust, and you will return to dust. Remember to repent and believe in the Gospel. Remember to prune out all that chokes out abundant life and grow in the fullness of the Son. Amen.