



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School
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Advent 1

December 1, 2013

“Plowshares and Pruning Hooks”

(Isaiah 2:4)

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“He shall judge between the nations, and shall decide disputes for many peoples; and they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war anymore” (Isaiah 2:4).

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come, that by Your protection we may be rescued from the threatening perils of our sins and saved by Your mighty deliverance; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen**

Last Saturday there was an article in the newspaper about the First World War and how it relied on chemistry to produce the level of destruction that it did. An interesting part of the article was about how some of the same chemicals could be used for better or worse, for constructive or destructive purposes. Chlorine and phosgene were used for disinfection and water purification but also in the production of mustard gas. Ammonium was used as a fertilizer, but also in the production of explosives. Picric acid was used as an antiseptic, but also in artillery shells (WSJ, *Molecular Catastrophe*, 11/23/13).

The inclination to turn helpful things into destructive things continues. Today, the U.S. is trying to coax Iran into using their knowledge of nuclear physics for the production of electricity, and not for the production of weapons.

Even music can be used for better or worse. Of course it can be beautiful. In Iraq it was also used in what was called “music torture”. Speakers blared music from the group Metallica and the children’s program Barney to deprive prisoners of sleep and to wear down their morale and resistance.

It seems we can use just about anything for constructive or destructive purposes. And so it was thousands of years ago. Many of the tools of war were primitive enough to be made from common farm implements. And when the war was over, they could be turned back into farm implements.

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Plowshares and pruning hooks. Life in ancient times revolved around the rhythms and patterns of agricultural seasons.

Most people had a small plot of land to farm and they were intimately connected to the land for daily bread and sustenance. There were no grocery stores or fast food restaurants. They lived off of what they could grow and sell.

The instruments used to farm the land were simple. The plowshare was like a big, heavy version of our garden hoe. It prepared the soil for planting, loosening hard soil so it would more readily receive and retain the rain. It turned over weeds. It softened and aerated the soil so roots could grow more easily.

Pruning hooks were basically shears, and they were used to remove dead, diseased or damaged branches so the tree or vine didn't waste energy on those parts. Pruning allows in more light and air inside the tree which increases productivity. Pruning encourages new growth, and shapes the tree so the fruit can be easily picked.

It's the First Sunday of Advent, and for about the first 800 years of Christianity, the season of Advent was much like the season of Lent. It was a period of fasting and self-examination and repentance. The plow and the pruning hook are reminders of these disciplines of Advent, doing the work of repentance in preparation for the Lord's coming.

The plow prepares the soil for seed. Remember Jesus also used the image of the land receiving seed and compared it to how people receive God's Word. Some of the seed of God's Word that is broadcast falls on the hard, unplowed soil, and it doesn't stand a chance. Some of the seed is choked out by weeds. Some of it is eaten by birds. But that which lands in good soil takes root and grows and produces a crop thirty, sixty, or even a hundred times was sown (Mk. 4:1ff). Plowing makes space for the seed. What plowing needs to happen in your life so that there can be space for God's Holy Word? Maybe setting aside some time first thing in the morning for a couple chapters in your Study Bible, followed by prayers? Maybe joining a small group Bible Study or starting one of your own?

Similarly pruning is about shaping and trimming in such a way as to promote fruitfulness. And in Advent, it's about taking a good hard look at ourselves and those parts of lives that may be impeding our growth. It is about acknowledging the damaged or

wounded or unhealthy parts of our lives, and recognizing that sometimes they just need to be cut off, rather than allowed to rob us of the energy we need in order to produce fruit.

Plowing and pruning: what in your life needs to be plowed under or pruned away? Plowing mostly involves brute force. There's not a whole lot of artistry or craftsmanship involved, other than being thorough and making straight lines. And sometimes raw strength is exactly what our lives need. I'm thinking of the strength it takes to put an end to an addiction or changing an unhealthy way of thinking. Not a lot of artistry or craftsmanship . . . just strength and discipline and resolve.

Pruning on the other hand is a real art. In the Greek, the same word used for pruning can also mean cleansing, and when you watch a pro prune a tree, you know why the word could also mean "cleanse." That which is shaggy and unkempt is given a haircut. Pros make it look easy and quick. They just seem to know, without even thinking about it, what needs to go. But for most of us, pruning is slow, tedious, deliberate work, making a cut here and there, stepping back to get the overall picture again, and then going back in for another cut or two. Pruning means recognizing those aspects of your character that are not worthy to remain – either because they are unproductive or because they interfere. Pruning involves the decision to cut it out, and put an end to something so that the better, stronger qualities can flourish and bear more excellent fruit.

Remember that fig tree that the Lord condemned? It was all leaves and no fruit. The tree's energy wasn't being used for anything other than its own growth. It was a fruit tree that didn't offer any fruit. There are people like that, all leaves and no fruit, and maybe each of us is like that at times. By nature our instinct is to walk through life always asking, "What's in it for me?" But God would have us ask something different. "What do I have with which I can serve others? What good fruit can I produce and offer for the world around me?"

Plowing and pruning promote growth. But the idea is to plow your own field, not someone else's, and to prune away your own diseased and damaged branches. Both require careful self-examination and genuine repentance.

Swords and spears are weapons, designed to kill. Plows and pruning shears are tools designed to make things grow and bear fruit. “They shall beat their swords into plows and their spears into pruning hooks.” But we find ways to do it the other way around. I’m thinking again of those chemicals in World War 1. There was nothing inherently evil about those chemicals. In fact, they could all be used in service of humanity. But we found ways to use them to kill and maim humanity.

We do that a lot. What did James say about the tongue? We can use it both to praise the Lord, but also to slander the neighbor. Bloggers who are clever and sharp and gifted with words and wit can use their gifts to build people up or tear them down. We can do that with just about everything we have. We have the capacity to instantly re-forged the plows and pruning hooks back into spears and swords. But God invites us to use what we have for the good. And he invites us to bring our sharp edges and prickly personalities, our cutting words and penetrating judgments to him through repentance, so that he can reshape and reform all those weapons into tools of grace and fruitfulness.

God’s Son Jesus always used what he had for good. He was fully human. He got angry, for sure, and he could be harsh. But he never sinned. It makes me think again of the pro who really knows what he’s doing with pruning shears. Sometimes he cuts way back, and to our eyes it looks so severe, so excessive. And when it’s us that he’s pruning, it hurts. But he knows just what needs to be cut and where to cut it so that we can bear better fruit and more of it.

Jesus got angry and made radical cuts into peoples’ lives, but when he went to the cross it was not for anything he had done but for what we do. As Isaiah wrote, “Although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.” The violence done to him on the cross won for us a perfect kind of peace. “By his wounds, we are healed.” Again, Isaiah pictures it here and elsewhere as a restoration of the bliss of Eden. They shall beat their swords into plowshares not because they’re peace loving pacifists, but because there’s simply no more need for swords and spears anymore. In the New Jerusalem, in the Kingdom of God there is

perfect peace and security. The Bible promises there will be no more crying or pain or death, no more attacking or defending, no more re-forging farm implements into weapons and back again, no more destructive use of chemicals or physics or music or words. All things only for the good for which they were created, and in service of him; not in service of evil.

In the end, he's the one who purchased true peace and security with his blood. He's the one who is going to usher in that peace when he comes again in glory. He's the one who will make the sword and the spear and any other kind of weapon utterly irrelevant. Amen. Come Lord Jesus.

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