

I can't speak for you, but I hope you're like me in this regard, and that is that I find the world fascinating. There's lots to see and do. There's lots to learn and grow. I never want to reach a point in time when I've learned everything I want to learn and done everything I want to do. My bucket list is infinitely long. I hope yours is too!

Unfortunately you can't do *everything*. And you certainly can't be good at everything. Choosing to do one thing and excel at it means that you have chosen not to do, and not to excel, at something else. Even a "Renaissance man" has had to make a lot of choices.

My first job was as a bridge inspector. It was hard work but I enjoyed it. There's no way I could go back to it now, at least not without a huge amount of work. Choosing to pursue being a pastor, and devoting the attention necessary to be good at it, meant that my mathematical skills and climbing skills had to be neglected. I couldn't do both and be good at both.

To co-opt the imagery Jesus uses in the gospel reading, I had to prune away one of those things in order to bear fruit in the other.

We live in vineyard territory and so this image Jesus uses makes a lot of sense to us. We see grape vines all over the place. We take wine tours and enjoy the fruit of those vineyards. A vineyard is a very interesting place, especially the vines. When I was growing up my parents had some grapes on a grape arbor. They didn't know what they were doing. We had lush vines growing up and over this arbor, but very few grapes. The grapes that there were tiny - more seed than anything. I remember my parents debating how to prune them. They were reluctant to prune too much - yet that is exactly what they needed to do.

When you drive by the vineyards along the Finger Lakes, especially in the wintertime, you see these rows of spindly crooked vines that look like they're in a war zone. They look dead - or at best, severely anorexic. You wonder what kind of nut cases these vineyard hire to do the pruning. Surely they've cut way too much.

You know the answer well, they have indeed been pruned back severely, but the right amount to get them to bear tons of grapes. If a grape vine is left to itself it will grow lots and lots of luscious looking green leaves and it will be beautiful. It won't bear many grapes. In other words, it will be a waste of space.

In the same way grape vines are pruned regularly, we should be pruning -or allow pruning- in our lives too. The world changes, and our lives change too.

An excellent example of this is when a person goes from being single to being married and starting a family. It is always interesting to watch the way people's interests change. Quite often their focus changes from pets and cars and entertainment to ...child care. I find myself getting really frustrated when I'm around people who I've known for years and they make that transition but they don't change their lives. I have a couple relatives who whenever I'm around them I want to yank them aside and give them a good talking to: You've got to get your priorities straight. You're a father now. Quit this selfish childishness. Cut back on all the hunting and fishing trips. Focus on your kids.

A new demand has emerged on their lives, and they aren't willing to prune away old growth in order to bear fruit.

Of course this does not mean you have to give up everything or quit having fun. Even a severely pruned vine still has several branches. It just can't keep them all if it wants to be productive.

Prayerfully review and consider every aspect of your life on a regular basis. Make sure that what you are doing is what you feel nourished by, and make sure it is productive. Sometimes we need to get rid of things that seem pretty big.

That not only goes for us as individuals, but us as a community of faith too. This is something I think we're pretty good at. We have no problem chopping off a program or tradition that doesn't suit us anymore. Many a church can't seem to do that.

In one of the other churches in our conference they have worship and Sunday School for children at the same time. Kids start off the service with their parents and then leave for Sunday School after the children's sermon. They've recently started a Sunday school curriculum about worship and their

education committee was asking their pastor how they could integrate the worship theme of Sunday school into worship itself. The pastor replied, "Why don't we just let the kids come to church!"

This sets up a very funny situation. Assuming kids are the same way they were when I was a kid, going to Sunday school was a lot more fun than going to worship. In Sunday school there are stories and crafts, there's music and activities. It's a lot of fun. During worship however you sit in rows. You stand up and sit down a lot. You have to be quiet. At best you can doodle on the children's bulletin during the sermon. You dread having Communion because it means the service takes longer.

And if we're honest with ourselves, or at least in my case, I've never outgrown that. Fortunately I don't have to sit through boring sermons anymore. I now get to write them!

My colleagues were joking about the situation of studying worship but not doing it. We said isn't it ironic that the kids will "graduate" from learning about worship to being bored by having to attend it.

Inasmuch as it's within my power I try not to have worship be boring. Not that it should be entertaining necessarily, but I hope that a Sunday morning experience here is something you can wake up looking forward to, rather than dreading. That can take a lot of pruning, and it also takes some openmindedness.

I know that during worship we start at a specified time, we sit in rows, and we follow a structure. But this is not the be all and end all of our worship or our Sunday faith experience. I think worship continues on in just as strong a way during coffee hour afterwards, and during Sunday School beforehand. I think the conversations we have and the community building we accomplish takes us even beyond our time here.

What is the purpose of the pruning Jesus calls for? In order to bear much fruit. And that fruit is acts of love. We bear that fruit as a community. Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. Nourished by our Lord and working with each other we do the work of the kingdom. We allow pruning in our lives as individuals and we allow pruning in our life as a community of faith. With Christ and with each other we embody and accomplish the acts of the love of God in this world. Amen

Not individuals, but community - see Gail O'Day pg. 760