

**Sunday 27th April 2025**

Practicing The Way – Crafting a Rule of Life

**Emma King on John 15:1-9 (Abiding in the True Vine)**

So, for anyone who knows me well will know my love for trees. I love trees. And here's something that you don't know about me (or maybe you do, I don't know), but I have a big blossom tree tattooed on my back. Such is my love for trees. And for me trees tell so many stories, don't they? And they've watched our stories unfold as well. Because how many of us have gone for a walk and we've seen a great big tree and with a great big round trunk and we've touched. Or seen a tree that really high, really tall and we've looked up in in wonder, and we've touched that tree and we've said, "oh my gosh, this tree could tell many stories." I imagine, lots of us have done that, and trees are a miracle in my eyes. They stand there through many storms, through the storms of life, whether actual physical storms, or through actual battles as well. They've been stood there, many of them, for hundreds and hundreds of years.

In our house in Salford, we have apple and pear trees in our garden, and I love watching the buds as they start to grow in the spring. You see them just on the edge and then they start, the leaves start to push through. And you watch them as they push through and then the buds start to grow. So, you watch that and then they start to blossom into this beautiful flower, and you get the most wonderful flowers on them, and they just look beautiful. They are there in all their glory in our garden. You're left thinking, "I just couldn't think of anything more beautiful than these trees right now." And then, it's like a wedding has happened, because then all the petals all fall like confetti in your garden, and it gets everywhere. But it looks beautiful before the fruit starts to appear. And then we get these lovely green apples and pears that we can cook and eat (only if Henry the dog doesn't get to them first).

All of that sounds lovely, doesn't it? You know, just watching all of this happen before our eyes we think "oh how wonderful all of this is happening." But what I fail to mention is the tension between Dan (my husband) and I when it is time to cut the trees back. The tension is incredible. The children either go to their bedrooms or they go out. The dog hides under the table. The cat hides under the dog. The neighbours close their windows. The whole of Salford goes away somewhere, because they know what's happening when it's time to cut the trees back.

Because this is how it goes: Dan gets his saw, he climbs up the trees and I say to him "just a short trim Dan, don't go crazy, because you know I love the trees." Then up he goes, and I stand there saying "No! No! That's too much! That's too much! You're going too heavy on it Dan!" And then I start pacing around and I'm saying to him "Dan what are you doing!? Just stop! You're hacking at them!" And as I'm saying all that, he's going "It's fine. It's fine." So, I go into the house and if the children are around I say "Look! Have you seen what he's doing to the trees?!" And it all goes crazy in the house and so I go back out into the garden with a strong cup of tea (or if it's like the evening I've poured myself a large glass of something by this point because I'm so stressed at the hacking). I then say "Well, as you've gone and done that you may as well just chop the whole tree down, it's worthless now!"

This is how it is in our house. The stress of watching these beautiful trees being hacked at turns me into a wild rage (it is something I'm continually trying to work on). But then Dan in his calm and gentle manner, as he's hanging out of the tree, putting his life into his hands, sweating because he's been cutting at these trees (and I'm sweating because he's cutting them) He's cut them hanging out of the tree and he says "Em, my love, it's okay. It will grow. And we need to cut it back because, then it will grow even better and grow more fruit. And if we don't cut it back, it will die. And it will make you even more sad (don't you hate it when they're right).

And the thing about this, is that Jesus knew that we would feel this way sometimes. He knew that, and that's why he gave us a way better picture than the cut-back apple trees in my garden. Because he says:

**“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”**

**John 15:5**

So, we're thinking today about “Crafting a Rule of Life”. So, how does this help us with a Rule of Life? Well, to start with the vine is not optional. Jesus doesn't say, “Hey, if you're feeling extra spiritual today maybe try the vine thing. That might work for you.” He doesn't say that. He says, “You *need* me, like a branch needs a vine.” Otherwise, you are just a stick. Not even a cool ‘Harry-Potter-type-of-wand-stick.’ Just a dry crunchy cut-off-the-apple-tree-and-thrown-away kind of stick. So how often do we try to bear fruit on our own? ‘Quite often’ is what I would imagine to be the answer. Because when we do that, we're not abiding. Rather, we're striving. We spend our days multitasking, and telling everyone how busy we are. “Oh, my diary is so busy!” And we pack our diaries so full that we need another diary to manage the first one. And we ask Jesus to bless our plans, instead of actually *surrendering* them to him.

And this is where the “Rule of Life” comes in because a Rule of Life isn't a prison it's not meant to trap us and keep us in. It's like a trellis in a garden, and that trellis is like a holy scaffolding for us. It's a way to structure our lives so that we stay attached to the vine even when life gets really loud and really complicated. We can stay attached to it. Jesus says he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be even more fruitful.

Now pruning is one of those words that sounds wonderful, doesn't it? “I'm just going to go and prune the flowers.” It sounds like you should be going out with a floaty flowery dress on. It sounds lovely. At least until you're hacking away. And then it sounds brutal, because at that point it feels like when we are getting pruned it feels like we're saying “God, why are you cancelling all of our plans? This is not what I asked for, this isn't what I wanted. I don't want to do this.” We might be thinking “Lord, I know that I have to do this, but it's so hard, and I don't want to.”

Sometimes it feels brutal to be pruned, but it's necessary. Because here's the thing:

*God doesn't prune us to punish us. He prunes us to FREE us.*

That's the difference in our lives. Sometimes he has to cut back good things so that he can grow more things. Grow God things. A Rule of Life invites us to ask hard, life-giving questions, like:

“What needs to go?”

“What do we need to prune in our lives?”

“What is taking up space that could be used for real growth?”

Maybe one of those things might be binge watching shows until 2am in the morning (I definitely never *ever* do that...). It might be saying “yes” to everything and everyone until we're running on resentment, or even worse burn-out where we literally can't do anymore. But whatever it is, pruning isn't cruelty, it's love. It's God saying, “You were made for real fruit!” Not just leafy busyness. Because fruit happens when you're not forcing it.

Jesus said, “**I am the vine, and you are the branches**” (John 15:5), because fruit happens naturally when the branch is attached to the vine. That means that if we're not seeing love, joy, peace and patience in our lives, maybe we don't need to try harder. **Maybe we just need to stay connected longer.** Maybe that's what we need to do when crafting a Rule of Life: creating space to be with Jesus.

So, we might need to ask ourselves some questions, and we might need to say “What rhythms help me feel connected to God?” We might need to ask ourselves “What drains me faster than a split paddling pool?” Building our Rule of Life around connection, and not performance, Jesus doesn't end this passage with a to-do list for us. He ends it with love.

**“As the father has loved me, I so have I loved you. Now remain in my love”**

**John 15:9**

On Friday I met with my lovely friend, and my first vicar, Ian. And we were talking about love. Everything comes down to love. And not just any love - Jesus's love. Jesus' love is completely different to any kind of love that we will ever experience in our lives. Ian is a wonderful man that I absolutely adore. He is so full of wisdom and humility and he said to me "You know, we strive to be 'this' and we strive to be 'that.' But, actually, all we need to be is us." And then he went on to say "It's taken me nearly 76 years, but I think I'm okay now with being just Ian." And then he said "But that's only because of Jesus's love we can be us."

The goal here isn't perfection. Jesus doesn't require perfection of us, but our presence with him. A Rule of Life isn't a checklist to impress God, or to impress our friends to say how holy we are. It's a rhythm to stay in love with him. Because we weren't made in a sausage factory - we're not all meant to be the same. We are a beloved branch. And God is not our line-manager or our schoolteacher. He's our gardener. And the best one that we could ever hope for. He's even better than your neighbour, with their back garden vineyard and their multiple compost bins, and their weirdly smug kale plants. He's even better than that.

So as I come in to finish this is what I think that we should do when we leave today.

I think that we should go home and light a candle...or don't.

We should put on some music...or maybe we should sit in silence.

We should make some lunch...or maybe we should eat some leftover pizza from last night.

But whatever we're going to do, we need to be in his presence as ourselves. Do whatever it takes to bring you and him together, and then ask God two questions:

- 1) "What kind of vine are you growing in me?"
- 2) "What kind of trellis do I need to help me to stay connected to you?"

You don't have to get it perfect. You don't need to write yourself a spreadsheet or have a vision board or anything to have your Rule of Life. You can even scribble your first one on the back of a shopping receipt if you need to. But let's start our new Rule of Life today.

So, there's three things that we need to start with...

- 1) The practice of connection each day: what connects us to God?; How do we connect to God as ourselves?
- 2) Think about what we need to prune: what is getting in the way?; what do we know deep down that we need to remove from our lives that's getting in the way between us and God?
- 3) Write down a reminder that we are wildly and ridiculously and lavishly loved like no other love you've ever experienced.

What makes you "you" is the "you" that God loves. So, as we finish let's remember this: that you are not an overly cut back apple tree in my back garden. You are a branch on the vine, because Jesus said so. And our lives, each one of us, is meant to be rooted in Jesus, and is meant to bear the kind of fruit that is the sweetest and the most joyful and juicy fruit that there could ever be. You are the branch on the vine because Jesus said so.