

**McCabe United Methodist Church**  
**Pastor Ray Baker**  
**“Pocket Knife, Shears, and Chainsaw”**  
**Galatians 5:15-26**  
**8/14-15/2010**

When I served in a rural parish I discovered there were many great attributes of living in a small community. For example: everyone in town knew your name, people would stop their cars in the middle of the street to have a conversation, people would leave baked goods inside your back door and zucchini in your unlocked car, someone was always there to give you a hand with your small children, and everyone helped the pastor’s family do their spring and fall yard work.

Now don’t get the wrong idea. I’m not inviting you to come and clean my yard this fall. I’m just setting up a story.

Receiving help with yard work was a major benefit of living next door to the church. It made up for being expected to shovel the snow on Sunday mornings. The first year it happened I was caught totally off guard. We were all working hard to clean the church yard, but before long I noticed a group of people who started cleaning our yard. I was actually embarrassed and I asked them to stop, but they smiled and said we always clean the pastor’s yard.

The parishioners would bring rakes, mowers, lawn bags, hammers, nails, paint and paint brushes, pocket knives, pruning shears, and chainsaws to help clean up the church yard. They were prepared for whatever might need to be done.

One year a gentleman from the church, who shall remain anonymous, walked over and asked Sarah if she knew anything about pruning a Lilac hedge? She was delighted to explain to him the lilac’s flowers bloomed from the previous year’s growth. She told him about having grown up with Lilac bushes at her family farm and she told stories about how much her grandmother loved the bushes and how she would bring the cut flowers into the house to brighten up the kitchen.

So, being a man, he asked again: do you know anything about pruning a Lilac hedge. This time Sarah explained you could trim it back in the fall and it wouldn’t

hurt the hedge. It's safe to cut off as much of the hedge as you wish. She also told him about a time when her grandfather cut the hedge all the way to the ground and let it grow back over the next few years.

This unidentified gentleman thanked Sarah for her help and walked toward the back yard. Moments later we could hear a chainsaw start and in about 15 minutes our Lilac hedge was cut to the ground and hauled away. There was a nothing left but little nub of the branches sticking two inches above the ground.

The only thing Sarah said was: "I didn't know he was talking about my Lilacs." Over the years I've seen people use everything from a pocket knife to a chainsaw as a pruning tool. But the Apostle Paul was a master with words and he used his rhetorical writing style to prune the new beliefs being taught at the church in Galatia.

Paul was very upset that another group of missionaries traveled to Galatia and gave a conflicting message about the Gospel, insisting that Paul's message was flawed. He was so angry that he refers to the missionaries' message as: A PERVERSION OF THE GOSPEL.

Paul wrote his letter to the Galatians to prune, cut out, the ideas being taught by these missionaries. Allow me to share his message in a very succinct manor. According to Paul in **Galatians 2:20-21**: the Gospel is the proclamation of our living relationship with Jesus the Christ. It is not about fulfilling the Law of the Old Testament.

I want to make sure Rick knows this bible verse because it will help him teach the confirmation students about the meaning of the Christian Faith. Of course, he will teach the confirmands a lot of important information and he will encourage them to proclaim their faith when they take their membership vows. But in the end the students need to learn the importance of participating in a relationship with God through the life of the Church.

This is also a lesson we need to re-learn. Our Faith relationship to Christ is more important than our beliefs (the law). We can only be Faithful when we are in a relationship, spending important amounts of time with Christ through the life of the Church.

I've talked with a number of people who told me they are too busy with work, travel, and play to participate in the life of the Church community? Or they think the teachings of the church are too antiquated and don't make sense in light of the science of our day. Another issue is our lives so full that we are too tired to participate?

I believe all these statements are true to a degree. We are too \_\_\_\_\_ to participate fully in the life of the Church. The reason why is different for all of us. But in order to put our Faith based relationship with Christ first we need to make meaningful changes. We need to "prune" those things in our lives which keep us from participating. Each of us will need to examine our own lives in order to identify what needs to be pruned.

I ask that all of us make a commitment to give up one thing, even if it's something small, so we can become the disciples Jesus called us to be. I invite you to give up an additional fifteen minutes every day in order to intentionally be in God's presence. You decide how to use the time: silent prayer, enjoying the beauty of nature, reading a devotional book, or listening to music. At the end of this time it's important to thank God for the gift of your life and the lives of you family and loved ones, because this keeps us in touch with the fact that God is the **Creator** and we are the **created**.

In addition, I invite you to examine your calendar and your checkbook to determine "**where your heart is**" because the things receiving your time and you money are the nearest to your heart. Therefore, I invite you to spend time in prayer about the priorities of your life.

I also recommend you join a small group at the church. It could be an adult Sunday school class or you could work as a teacher, sing in the choir, or work with the youth group. But give up at least one hour a week to participate in the life of our faith community. The rewards will easily outweigh your efforts and your lives will be blessed. You will be blessed with stronger Spiritual gifts for your efforts. As the apostle Paul promised you will be blessed with: Love, Joy, Peace, Patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, Gentleness, and self-control.

One of the surprises I've learned over the last 22 years is sometimes there are things inside the church that need to be pruned. Now I'm sure this is a surprise to all of you, but there are things within our walls that need to be pruned. Why? Because there are things inside the church that act as a closed doorway, keeping people outside.

I don't know this church well enough to identify the sacred cows in our midst. They often show themselves in conversations with these words: "We've never done it that way before."

Allow me to give you some examples of lay people who have "opened the doors" in their church to make room for new people.

I know about a man who wanted to make a difference in the lives of the young parents attending his church. Since he didn't know the parents very well he decided to stand at the church door on Sunday morning and watch as young moms and dads drove up to the church door and drop their kids off for Sunday School and then, to his surprise, they would drive away. It drove him crazy watching this happen week after week.

Then he had an idea. The next Sunday he stood outside and asked the parents to come in for breakfast while they waited for their children to finish Sunday School. He didn't have any takers the first week, but by the end of the first month he had a group of parents who were enjoying breakfast and becoming acquainted with each other and a few members of the church. As this project grew it involved more and more of the regular church attendees, because he needed help in the kitchen, people to serve, and people to visit with the parents. This breakfast ministry provided a doorway into the church for parents who didn't feel like they belonged.

Here's another example, and I'm a little afraid to share it with you.

I know a woman who didn't like attending the church because she didn't like the pastor's preaching. But her husband didn't mind the pastor's preaching, because he was nearly deaf. This was a devout couple in their late 60's and they weren't about to stay home from church or shop for another church home.

So the woman came up with a plan. She went to the pastor and the parents in the church and received permission to start a children's ministry during the last half of

the worship service. Over the nine year period she led the program it grew from having 3 kids in the program, to a ministry that cared for 38 kids on a regular basis. So, she needed to recruited more teachers. She needed people to donate supplies and goodies for the children. The amazing thing about the story is the pastor in question moved shortly after she started the program, but the program is still reaching children today, approximately twelve years later.

The reason pruning is important is it leaves an opportunity for new growth. We need to prune our personal lives and the life of our church in order to allow new growth within our community. This can be scary. This can be uncomfortable. AND it's important to do.

Let's begin by being in prayer with God about how we can grow in our Relationship to Christ. If we start there we are guaranteed to have a great outcome.