

One of the Best Ideas

[John 15:1-17](#)

[1 Timothy 6:17-19](#)

Lynnewood United Methodist Church

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Whenever I go to pruning back a rosebush, I'm rather hesitant. I have trouble believing that cutting the bush way back is going to help it bloom in the next season. I should take the advice of the vine-growers throughout this beautiful wine country, to trust that the harvest will be plentiful by cutting back the vine.

At my last church, I had blackberries in the backyard of the parsonage. The vines were choking out a tree when I moved in. But I thought, oh well, how nice, I'll have blackberries to pick later in the summer! But the vines grew and grew, and then they began to invade the lawn. So I chopped away at them, cutting the bushes back toward the fence, and then I fought to get those stickery branches into the green bin. Well, you should have seen the harvest! Great big bunches of lush blackberries, some an inch in diameter, hanging on the ends of the branches, ripe and beautiful! The cutting back was just what the blackberries needed to maximize the fruitfulness of the vine.

There is a certain amount of risk you have to take when pruning. Like the best fruit, the best ideas in life involve taking a certain amount of risk.

There was a PBS special called "The National Parks: America's Best Idea." John Muir was featured in a 6-episode TV series as the man, more than any other, whose idea it was to preserve America's wildernesses. John Muir was born in 1838 in Scotland. His family immigrated to the United States in 1849 and settled in Wisconsin. As a young man in 1868, he came to California and was instantly captivated by Yosemite Valley. Yosemite became a sacred place for Muir; he called it a "cathedral." "Going to the mountains is going home," he said. It was his path to God. Muir claimed we need to encounter the God of creation, and there is no better way to do that than to walk in places of natural beauty. Muir was deeply spiritual. If it had not been for his crusading ideas, the *Contra Costa Times* stated, "Yosemite and other national treasures might be gated communities or tacky theme parks" (Sept. 27, 2009). Muir made a profound impact on policies of our government, especially in the creation of the National Park system. Muir's writings convinced the U.S. government to protect Yosemite, Sequoia, Grand Canyon and Mt. Rainier as National Parks (see www.nps.gov). Muir wrote: "Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where Nature may heal and cheer and give strength to body and soul alike" (*The Yosemite*). Today there are 412 National Parks. The National Parks are celebrating their 100th anniversary year, which began August 25.

John Muir understood the interconnectedness of creation. He put it this way: "When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the Universe." This is the idea of the vine. We are all connected to the natural vine, God's handiwork. Muir recognized that this delicate, interconnected balance of nature could be easily destroyed.

He fought his whole life for the protection of our plants and animals, our mountains and our rivers. We have inherited much of the beauty of California due to his legacy of love for nature and his determination to fight for its preservation.

One of America's best ideas we could certainly say was the National Parks. And if we look beyond our country's borders and nationhood, I wonder what we would say is one of the *world's* best ideas.

When I taught social studies, I used to ask my students to write reports on famous individuals who had changed the world. On the list were names like Abraham Lincoln, Adolf Hitler, William Shakespeare, Pablo Picasso, and Jesus of Nazareth. My students were always surprised to find Jesus on the list. They hadn't thought of Jesus as a historical figure, whom we could actually talk about in public school. But why not? Who has changed the world more than Jesus and his followers? I think we can say safely that the Church of Jesus Christ is one of the world's best ideas, maybe the very best idea of all.

The idea to build the Church of Jesus Christ is manifested in communities the world over. And this idea was nurtured here in the last 50 years at Lynnewood United Methodist Church. Creating a congregation here in Pleasanton was without a doubt a good idea.

The idea that one should worship in one's own community—that's a good idea. It was a good idea that forward thinking Methodists met together in a living room in 1966 and started talking about a church for Dublin and Pleasanton. It was a good idea that ministers and lay people knew they could be a church even before they had a church building. All they needed was faith and leadership and some hard work. They didn't wait for a building; they just started having worship, first in a garage on Santa Rita Road in July of 1966, then at a school with a charter worship service with 66 charter members, then at a military chapel at Camp Parks, then at another church shared by Episcopalians and a YMCA. It was a good idea that the California-Nevada Conference had the foresight to purchase this parcel of land. Then, later, it was a good idea that the congregation took the risk to plan for future generations and raised money to build a multi-purpose building, where new families could come and catch the spirit of love that the early members so evidently kindled. It was a good idea that the congregation broke ground on this building in 1987 to create a beautiful worship space, then to remodel it and add the office wing, and to greatly expand our Faber Education Building, so that it could be rented out to a preschool for substantial annual income. It was a good idea that the congregation took the risk to raise the money to buy a parsonage on Black Avenue, so that future ministers would be able to live in a nice home, convenient to the church. And now, it is a good idea that we have enlarged our Fellowship Hall in education building for our growing congregation, complete for our Jubilee! There was a certain amount of risk at each step of the way, surely, but thanks to the Spirit of God working in the lives of the people of this church these past 50 years, we are here today.

The Hebrew Bible teaches that on the 50th year, the community of God should celebrate. It should forgive debts, share the harvest with the poor, and blow the trumpet. Our ancient

biblical writers had a good idea—the idea to celebrate God's goodness and to observe a Jubilee year to say thank you. We are doing just that.

The people of Lynnewood have been connected to the story of God's goodness all along. The connection goes back thousands of years to God's commandments to honor God and our neighbors. The early church that we read about in the Book of Acts told the story of Jesus, and it was spread through the missionary work of Paul around the Mediterranean, through the Eastern and Western Churches, through the Roman Catholic Church, through the Protestant Reformation, through the Wesleyan movement, and it was spread across this country in little local churches built in every town, all the way to us today in Pleasanton, California. And the church was spread around the world to India, to the Philippines, and to Nigeria! And here today we are connected to the history of the Christian Church through the people at Lynnewood who 50 years ago and throughout these 50 years have cared enough to keep this church going and growing.

15 different ministers have preached the gospel of Jesus Christ at Lynnewood over these 50 years. People tell the story in different ways. The way the good news is told in John's Gospel is quite different from the other three Gospels. The Book of John uses signs and symbols—it describes Jesus as saying, "I am the vine, you are the branches." It's John's version of what it means to follow Jesus. We are all connected to God and to one another.

This is the best idea there is.

The best ideas are ones that are not just for personal pleasure in the moment; they are also for the common good of future generations. They are ideas that come with risk, but with a risk worth taking because the ideas are grounded in love. God's love gives us the assurance to take risks; in fact, God's love gives us the mandate to take risks.

Our love for God requires us to give to others even when our own resources are stretched thin. Our love for God demands that we reach out to our neighbors, like those at Pleasanton Gardens, the low-cost housing project we helped found in 1967. Our love of God demands that we help people in need, as we do through our partnership with the Pleasanton Community Counseling Center since 1990, housed in our office building. Our love for God demands that we feed the hungry, such as at Open Heart Kitchen, an organization we helped found in 1995. And our love for God makes us care for our congregation by giving people quilts when they are healing from a health crisis.

We are now taking risks to assist low-income people with micro financing through our Grace for the Journey Jubilee Initiative, and by helping at Partners for Change, giving people who are poor a second chance. We are still taking new risks—like when we started a Sunday evening service called "Come As You Are." And last night we took another risk by going out beyond our walls to meet potential new neighbors at Ramona Park in San Ramon. Our vision is to "dare to question, love, and serve."

What risks will we dare to take in the next fifty years? Perhaps we will partner with the schools to provide readiness for kindergarten or English language lessons for parents and

grandparents. Perhaps we will start small groups in new housing neighborhoods, or learn to use social media to connect with people who are alone. We know we have a very good idea—the idea that together we can know God and one another in meaningful ways by being the church. It's one of the very best ideas.

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit."

We have inherited a legacy of love from those who came before us. In 1 Timothy, we hear the advice of one minister to another: Tell the people: Don't expect wealth to bring happiness. Don't put your hope in finances. You'll find treasure, not in money, but in being generous and doing good things. That's how you'll build a foundation for the future.

We have that kind of foundation for our future as a church—a foundation of love and generosity.

This congregation has many memories. 6 former ministers will participate next weekend: 5 at the dinner Saturday night, and 4 at our worship services on Sunday at 9:00 and 10:30. Several of our charter members will be present for you to meet and thank. All who have participated in our 50 years, clergy and laity, have lived close to the vine and have abided by Jesus' commandment to love one another. There is a certain risk in loving; it means giving of yourself, it means caring about others, it means living for a future that is never certain. But the vine is strong and the vine-grower even stronger. Thanks be to God for a firm foundation of 50 years of growth here at Lynnewood United Methodist Church.