

No. 5

PRUNING PLANTS AND PURGING CLOSETS



hydrangea

In front of our house sits a huge hydrangea plant that's blooming like crazy right now. Every time a friend comes over, I send her home with an armful of the perfect purply-blue blossoms with plenty more on the bush to spare. My favorite black-and-white striped pitcher, overflowing with big hydrangea stems, sits in the center of my kitchen table. The kids keep moving it at dinnertime because we can't see each other over it, but I move it back once we're finished because few things make me happier than fresh flowers.

Last year, our hydrangea had only a few blooms, but this year, it's a different story. What changed? In the fall, Ryan pruned the shrub way back. It pained me to see him cut away my beloved hydrangea, my favorite flower! It's what my bridesmaids carried in my wedding and one of the things that drew me to our new house in the first place.

It felt so wrong to take off so much. What if the cutting back meant the shrub would never bloom again?

But as it turns out, pruning is exactly what that hydrangea plant needed in order to flourish. I don't know a ton about gardening, but I do know that pruning is part of the deal. Old limbs and dried blossoms are removed. A shrub is clipped into a shape like a squared-off hedge or topiary or a giant boxwood elephant sculpture. Sometimes there are so many offshoots and crisscrossing branches, the poor thing can't figure out where to send nutrients. Unless some are cleared out, the whole plant suffers. It's not always about cutting off the old and the dead though; at times perfectly fine parts are removed for the sake of the plant and its ongoing health and potential to thrive. With each cut, growth is stopped in one direction and encouraged in another.

After Jesus invites us to come to him to recover our lives, he extends a second invitation, this time a promise: "I will give you rest" (Matthew 11:28 NIV). I believe in self-care and rest. I don't know a single person who would pass on the chance to spend an afternoon doing only the most enjoyable and calming activities. Let yourself daydream about a perfectly restful scenario. It looks delightful, doesn't it? When I think of rest, I imagine a midafternoon nap, a break from responsibility, time to paint or bake or read uninterrupted. Yet when I read Jesus's amazing offer to show us how to take a *real* rest, I wonder if



candle

there is a difference between his version and mine, if he has something deeper and more lasting in mind than a long bubble bath by the light of a favorite Anthropologie candle.



My mom loves shopping. Scratch that—my mom loves a good deal. This is great when it comes to making wise purchasing decisions, like waiting for a couch to go on sale or scouring Craigslist for gently used American Girl dolls for her granddaughters instead of buying them brand new. But take a look at her overflowing closet and you'll quickly see that a markdown on a price tag has tempted her one too

many times.

Last year, she asked my sisters and me to come help her purge her cluttered closet. My older sister, Amy, like a true firstborn, is organized and has a gracious way of telling the truth without hurting feelings. Hillary, my little sister, is the fashionable one, and we all look to her for opinions on what to wear. And me? Well, I'm just very good at getting rid of things.

We met up at Mom's house on a Friday morning and set right to work. One by one, we pulled items out of her closet, asking a set of quick decision-making questions: *Do you wear it? Do you like it? Does it fit?* If she couldn't answer yes to all three questions, the sweater or dress or pair of pants was tossed to the side. By the end of Operation Closet Clean Out, my mom's wardrobe was cut in half and her closet was lovingly organized with only the clothes, shoes, and bags she needed and wanted. Mission accomplished. This day of purging was painful for my nostalgic, deal-seeking mom. She had an attachment to almost every article of clothing, and even if it was never worn or no longer in style, it had a memory or a sale price that she didn't want to part with. She put up a playful fight with each piece that landed in the growing giveaway pile, finally acquiescing as we reminded her that she asked for this.

The clearing out, while hard, was so good. It made room on the

racks, provided space for her clothes to hang nicely, and revealed to my mom that just because it was a good deal did not mean it needed to be *her* good deal. The purging of the overstuffed closet was necessary to clear away the old and the unflattering and leave open space for future can't-pass-up purchases.



The pruning of plants and purging of closets can feel unsettling and stir up fear: What if cutting away means nothing good will grow back in its place? What if I never find another dress as wonderful (even though it's the wrong size)? Most of us don't readily invite change, endings, and loss into our lives. These are hard to endure and even harder to welcome. But as my wise friend Reagan says, "An element of disruption is always needed to initiate lasting change." My soul was ready for lasting change.

Real rest requires an undoing. Like removing your shoes before tucking your legs up under you on the couch or taking out your ponytail before laying your head down, the things that are binding and tangling



Scissors

need to be unbound and untangled to prepare for real, deep, spiritual rest. This is no small act.

As we accept Jesus's invitation to find real rest, we have to start with surrender. When we release our tight grip on our lives, we allow old patterns and wrong ways of thinking to fall away. There's no difference between pruning an unfruitful branch and letting go of the blouse that never did fit right. This letting go makes way for new, beautiful, abundant growth.

Uncovering what we need to release from our lives and figuring out how to loosen our grip on them takes time, patience, and intentional effort. As I began to pay attention to the behaviors and patterns of being that kept me in a hamster wheel of striving, I identified a few big ones: Control. Comparison. Distractions. Comfort. And an overall reliance on self. These parts had to be cut away. I knew it would hurt, but ultimately, I held firmly to the hope that Jesus's invitation into real rest was for me, and this was a necessary step in receiving it.

Sleeping in, time alone, coffee with friends, and finding hobbies that make you come alive are all wonderful. Do these things! But don't just stop there. The rest Jesus offers is *true* rest for our souls that we can find only when we let go of unfruitful efforts to prove ourselves worthy and make room for God to bring forth new life. We participate in this growth by letting go of our mistaken beliefs about

where identity, purpose, and belonging are found and allow him to restore our hearts to the truth. Are you longing for a deep inner disposition of rest? If so, it's freely yours.



grapes

He cuts off every branch in me
that bears no fruit,
while every branch that does
bear fruit he prunes
so that it will be
even more fruitful.

JOHN 15:2 NIV