God is like a gardener who prunes us so that we will bear fruit. Pruning involves taking a knife, a clipper, or a saw to a plant, sometimes cutting it down without killing it, so that the plant may grow to greater splendor. Pruning sounds painful. Most people are uncomfortable with personal pruning. Versions of Christianity only want to present a comfortable image of Jesus- a feel-good Jesus, an “only faith is sufficient Jesus”, a “no work is required of us Jesus”, a Jesus that doesn’t expect anything from us. This isn’t the Jesus we get in the Gospel. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches. Expect to get pruned. Expect trials, tribulations, and hardships that will test faith. We understand why we have to deal with hard times. Hard times help us grow. It can be difficult to measure a person’s character solely during the good times. It’s during the challenging times that a person’s character is more easily discernable. From the Acts of the Apostles, we have the continuation of the story of Saul’s conversion. Before he converted to Christianity, he was a persecutor of Christians. The Lord appeared to him on the road to Damascus and asked him “Why do you persecute me?” Saul fell to the ground blind. For three days he was unable to see, and he neither ate nor drank. Finally, he was taken to a disciple of Jesus and was healed. The Lord pruned this man so he could make the transformation from Saul to St. Paul.

Why we would prune a plant? First, to get rid of dead or diseased branches to promote the health of the entire plant. Second, pruning can help maintain a plant so that it will fit appropriately in the landscape of a garden. Third, a gardener may prune a plant to improve that plant’s appearance. Finally, pruning can help protect the wellbeing of other plants or even people if there is a safety concern. God can prune our souls for similar reasons. God may prune us to promote our overall spiritual health. God may prune us so that the dead or diseased areas of our souls are removed, such as in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. God may prune us so that our values and belief systems fit better in the landscape of the Church. God may prune us to improve our overall wellbeing and the wellbeing of people around us.

Most of us can remember a time(s) when we were pruned. We should be able recognize the fruits of these pruning moments. For instance, if a young priest didn’t experience the horrors of Nazism and Communism, one wonders if he would have grown into Pope John Paul II? If a young sister hadn’t come face to face with the horrors of poverty in the streets of Calcutta, would she have grown into Mother Teresa? In the divine plan, God allows us to experience evil so that greater good may come of it in ways we might not readily see or understand. Can you identify the pruning moments in your life and identify how God used these moments to help you grow into the person you are today? Consider how the quality of our character today is due in part to the pruning experiences we went through, the lessons learned, and the values adopted as a result. We can take time to prayerfully consider: If we asked the Lord to take His pruning shears to our souls, where would you like Him to start? What branches in the soul need clipping so to promote better spiritual health? What areas in our lives are simply incompatible with our vocational choices that need to be sheared off so our lives can fit better in the landscape we find ourselves in, such as our family or our identity as a Christian? What areas in our lives need a little snipping for the benefit of our wellbeing or the wellbeing of people around us? There’s nothing fun about being pruned. On the other hand, when we look back from heaven, how grateful we’ll be for the skillful hands of the master Gardener! After all, the fruit of the Lord’s handiwork is our salvation.