

First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida
Dr. Frank Allen, Pastor
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John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. [2] He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. [3] You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. [4] Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. [5] I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. [6] Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [7] If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. [8] My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

MOTHER'S DAY

We will have no softball game today. Today is Mother's Day, and not even softball can top that.

I love it when they put the camera on the big, hulking football players of the NFL. Almost always they say the same thing, "Hi Mom." Forget about dad. Mom gets all the TV air time.

There's a reason for that. Mom brought us into the world, and we always have a special connection with her. We will do things for our mother that we wouldn't do for anyone else. When something happens in our life, mom is the first one that we want to tell.

And those who don't have that connection, those who don't know their moms or are estranged from her are often plagued with social and psychological problems.

There have been several specials on TV lately about adults who were adopted as children. They had perfectly good foster parents, but they have still tried to locate and establish a relationship with their birth parent.

Often it didn't work out, but they still had to try. It was as if an important part of their life was missing.

I think of that line from the old spiritual, "Sometimes I feel like a motherless child." Now that is a sad and lonely line if ever I heard one.

We need family connections, and we especially need that connection with our mother. And for many of us mom always remains a source of hope and encouragement. Even when she is gone, she has a big influence on our life as we think about what she taught us and how she loved us.

THE SPIRITUAL CONNECTION

Just as we need to maintain our family connection, in an even greater way, we need to maintain our spiritual connection. We need to be connected to our Creator.

The Bible tells us that God is the mother and father of us all. In God we live and move and have our being.

And if we lose our connection with God, if we find ourselves cut off from our spiritual root, then it is as if we are a motherless child. The most important and necessary part of our life is missing. I think it was Augustine who said that there is a "God shaped" hole in every heart that only God can fill.

And yet we often neglect that which is most important. Whenever I counsel with someone who is experiencing the symptoms of burnout, I want to know about their spiritual life. Our anthem this morning once again puts it well. "When you left your room this morning, did you think to pray?"

I'm not just talking about folding your hands and saying a few words before you rush off to do other things. I'm speaking more about what Paul was referring to when he wrote that we should "pray without ceasing". Everything we do must be seen in the context of God's will and God's purpose for our life. We need to always ask ourselves, "Is God a part of my daily life? Do you place my life in the context of God's will and God's promises?"

LEARNING TO TAKE IN

A young minister asked a more experienced and successful minister to explain why he was so effective. What was his secret?

The minister replied, “Every morning I am in my study praying and studying the Word of God. If you’re going to give out, you have to learn to take in.” I’ve repeated that advice to fellow ministers and to myself many times over the years. If you’re going to give out, you have to learn to take in.

I think that’s an important principle for all of us to learn. In order to be successful disciples of Jesus Christ we have to learn to take in. We have to learn how to stay connected to the source of our strength and hope.

It seems like such a simple thing to do, but I know from personal experience it is anything but simple. In every phase of life, there is the temptation to focus too much on something other than the grace of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. We become busy with many things, but we neglect the most important thing.

PURPOSE DRIVEN

And when we do that, even the most noble of intentions can be diverted in a way that is not helpful. Sometimes even in the church we fill up our schedule with meetings and programs, but we never stop to ask, “Is this really fulfilling our purpose? Do these activities really draw us closer to God? Are these things helping us to connect with God in a meaningful way?”

Whether you agree with his approach or not, I think that Pastor Rick Warren has a point. We in the church need to be clear about our priorities. What is most important? What is our purpose and do our activities reflect that purpose? If not, we have to radically trim away those things that do not produce fruit for the kingdom of God.

In order to be effective disciples of Jesus Christ, we have to stay close to the source. We have to remember that God as revealed in Jesus Christ is the Lord of our life. He alone is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Only by staying close to him do we have an abundant life.

PLANTED BY THE RIVER

When I lived in Virginia, we went through several periods of drought. The grass turned brown and even the trees looked like they might die. But, the New River ran through our area, and the trees and vegetation that grew along the river were always green and full.

The reason was obvious. The roots of those trees and plants had a continuous supply of life giving water from the river that flowed in their path. Even the driest of times would have no effect on the trees that were planted beside the mighty river.

In the same way, if we plant ourselves beside the source of life, if we abide in Christ and his word, then we will remain strong even during the driest times of our life. I am reminded of the words of the Psalmist, who said that the happy person delights in God's word.

He wrote, "They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

Psalm 1:3 (NRSV)

This is the main idea behind the metaphor that Jesus uses in our lesson for today. Jesus told his disciples, "I am the vine, you are the branches." We derive our life and strength from the source, from the main vine.

PRUNING

And in order to be effectively connected to Jesus and produce fruit for the kingdom of God, our lives sometimes need to be pruned. In our lesson for today Jesus said that pruning is necessary for all of us.

I'm no gardener, but I do know that pruning is necessary, and in some cases what seems like drastic pruning can produce a stronger plant.

In my old subdivision we had many crepe myrtle trees. I couldn't believe how far back they trimmed those trees. I was sure that they had killed them.

And yet, when the growing season came, the trees came back stronger and more beautiful than before.

I hear that the same principle applies to the pruning of the grapevine, the plant that Jesus refers to in our passage for today. One observer described it this way. He wrote,

“If you travel through the wine country of Washington State or California in the fall of the year, you see lush entanglements of grape vines reaching along the wire stringers that guide the direction of growth.

But, if you return in the early spring, you see a drastically different scene. Nearly all of the grape vines have been pruned away. All that remains at the start of the season are the roots, the trunk, and the short, burly limbs that are trained outward along the wires. From these will burst dozens of fingers of new growth.

Later in the season, these fingers will have become the long, green, vibrant vines from which hang clusters of burgeoning fruit.”

The vinedressers have learned over the years that when the winter pruning is less severe, the summer fruit is less plentiful.

THE WORD OF GOD

How does this pruning take place in our life?
What are the pruning shears that God uses?

According to this passage, they are the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ.

I'm reminded of a verse from the book of Hebrews that reads,
“... the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing until it divides soul from spirit, joints from marrow; it is able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.” Hebrews 4:12

In other words, God's message is sometimes like a surgeon's scalpel. It cuts through our doubts and defenses and prepares us to hear and obey in a new and deeper way. Sometimes God's word is a word we would rather not hear

because it causes us to confront our sinful ways and change in ways that we find painful.

I've found that when I'm having a problem in some area of my life, when I feel drained and burned out, it often helps to ask,

“What promise of God have I forgotten? What commandment am I breaking? What needs to change in my life? What needs to be pruned away so that I might reconnect my life with that which is most important?”

If we listen with an open mind and heart, the word of God as revealed in Jesus Christ has the power to change us, to refocus our priorities and reconnect us with our source of strength and hope.

We need to remember that our faith is always changing and growing. I've told some of you that I keep a file of all my old sermons. Sometimes I will read one of those sermons and say, “I can't believe that I said that. I don't believe that anymore!”

Now, don't misunderstand. The basics of the faith have not changed for me. I have always been connected to the root of our faith, God as revealed in his Son, Jesus.

But, my theology has been pruned by experience and a deeper understanding of God's Word. Over the years certain attitudes and habits and beliefs had to be cut away so that I might more closely follow the way of God as revealed in Jesus.

And the farther I go on that journey, the more I realize that I have really just begun.

SOME RAIN MUST FALL

There's an old saying, “When a gardener prunes his plants, it's at that time that he is closest to them.” I believe that during the tough times, the times of temptation and struggle God comes closer to us and uses those negative experiences to bring about a positive result.

Those of you who have been here a while know that I've had trouble with water coming into my office. It was so bad after the hurricanes that I had to even abandon my office for several months. But, now the office has been refurbished and the water problem has been cured ... or so I thought.

This past week we had a very mild shower, and as I entered my office that morning you'll never guess what I found. That's right. The water was pouring down the wall and (luckily) filling up my waste basket.

Now I know that into every life some rain must fall. But, on that particular day I thought to myself, "But does the rain always have to fall in my office?"

Sometimes it seems like everything we do turns out wrong. Like the born loser there seems to be a cloud following us around. We sometimes even wonder if God might be punishing us.

My favorite expression of this sentiment is a line from *Fiddler on the Roof* when the beleaguered Jewish father after many tragedies cries out something like, "Lord, I know that we are your chosen people but do you have to choose us so often?"

Actually, the rain doesn't always fall on us. We have good times, times when we feel happy and blessed. But, quite often in the good times we don't pay much attention to the spiritual side of our life. We have our own agenda and sometimes our full schedule crowds out the most important thing.

But, when the rain does come, when problems fill our life, we are sometimes encouraged to reconnect with our true source of life and hope. We make time for God because our needs are so great.

WALLY

Clayton Schmit, a Lutheran minister, told of a parishioner by the name of Wally. Wally had stomach cancer for many years. Wally would often get good news, his cancer was in remission. Then, he would get some not so good news; the cancer had returned.

The pattern repeated for many years. The cancer flourished just enough to keep him sick, and then abated enough to give him hope that God was healing him.

Clayton wrote, "Over the years Wally developed a remarkable resilience and faith. He once told me, 'Pastor, if I had the choice today either to be healed completely or to go back to the level of faith I had before all this started, I would choose to remain ill. Through this time of struggle God has strengthened my faith to the point where I cannot imagine being without it.'"

Clayton concluded,
"Wally died a few years later. His funeral was a great celebration of a man who knew what it meant to abide in Christ."

THE YOUNG FATHER

A young father learned the same thing. He was struggling the day of his wife's funeral, trying to put his son to bed. Both were numb with sorrow.

The little boy asked, "Daddy, where is Mommy?"
He tried to answer the question, but the little boy kept asking, "Where is Mommy? When is she coming back?"

After a lot of attempts to satisfy his son, the father picked up the little boy and put him in his own bed. Finally, the little boy reached out his hand through the darkness and placed it on his father's face, asking, "Daddy is your face toward me?"

Given assurance, he said, "If your face is toward me, I think I can go to sleep."

The father lay beside the young son and prayed, "O God, the way is dark and I do not see my way through right now, but if your face is toward me, somehow I think I can make it."

Wally's story and the story of the young father's struggle remind us of how God is with us and gives us strength for the tough times. God's face is toward us. God abides with us.

ABIDE WITH ME

That's what Jesus meant when he told his disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you." Of the 17 uses of the word "abide" in the dictionary, 8 are obsolete. Abide is not a word that we use much any more.

And that's a shame because it's a word that we need now more than ever. Abide means to persevere, to continue, to last, to stay with. No wonder the term is rare. What it means is rare ... in our time or in any other.

In our rapidly changing world nothing seems to abide. "Classic" music is defined as last year's hits and an "ancient" computer is one manufactured just six months ago!

And the temporary nature of our society is also mirrored in our relationships. Friendships end all too soon. Business contracts are based not upon trust but upon how much we can get away with.

Marriages often come to a premature end. In fact, when couples enter into the covenant of marriage the words of our text are often used. They make a promise to abide, but in only a few short years that promise is broken. God only knows how many tears are shed and how much psychological dysfunction is caused because people are unable to abide by the sacred covenant of marriage.

But, even when we keep our word, the best relationships end too soon. We move away from friends and family. Death takes us from the ones we love the most. And we wonder, "Does anything abide? Does anything last forever?"

All of us need something or someone that will abide with us through thick and thin.

The Bible tells us that the Spirit of Christ is that someone. His face is always toward us, and when we abide in him, he abides in us. He is the vine, and we are the branches. He is the source of our life and hope.

I know that the rain is falling on many of you this day.

I would encourage you to trust not in your own understanding but in the promises and power of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. Abide in him. His face is toward you. His grace will lift you up.

Remember his vine lasts forever, and He will help you once again bear fruit to the glory of His kingdom.

Amen.

FIRST PRESBYTERIAN