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"Christians are Well Connected"

John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

[15:1] "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.

THE TRUE VINE

**Jesus said, "I am the true Vine."
This is the last of the so-called "I am" statements in the gospel of John.**

(For those of you who haven't been with us over these past few weeks these "I am" statements are very important to the telling of Jesus' story in John's gospel.)

The "I am" statements hearken back to the call of Moses. God told Moses His sacred name as a part of that call. Loosely translated God's name was something like "I am who I am."

So, in John's gospel Jesus is making a very radical claim. In Jesus the Word of God becomes flesh and dwells among us. And familiar images from the Hebrew Scriptures are used in new and very different ways.

This is certainly true when it comes to the image of the vine.

In the Hebrew Scriptures the vine was a metaphor for God's people. The people of Israel were God's vineyard. They were planted and cared for by God. They should have produced the fruit of justice and love.

But, according to the Old Testament prophets often this did not happen. God's people turned away from their unique calling to be a light to the nations.

And so God created a new vine, a new source of hope. Jesus was the true vine. He brought a word of hope not only for the people of Israel but for all the people of the world.

And the measure of faithfulness is not the rules and regulations of any religious group ... be it Christianity or the Jewish faith. The measure of faithfulness is the life, death and resurrection of Jesus.

So the questions we must always ask are: Do our actions conform to the example of the Master? Are we connected to God in what we do?

Jesus is the true vine. God is the vinedresser. And we are the branches. We draw our strength and hope from God in Christ alone. Apart from the True Vine we can do nothing.

Some of you may have read the editorial by Leonard Pitts in yesterday's newspaper. He talked about the times in history when many Christians acted in very un-Christian ways.

Specifically he cited the holocaust, the civil rights movement and most recently the torture of prisoners after the attacks of 911. He stated that in each of these events the majority of Christians acted in cowardly and un-Christian ways.

(By the way, his argument was fallacious in many ways. He used too broad a brush to paint the majority of Christians as intolerant, fearful and unfaithful.

Life and the Christian church are always much more complex than the commentators in the newspaper like to imagine. In each of the cases that he cites there were also many Christians who took a stand against evil.)

But, he did make a valid point.

Often many Christians have failed to do the right thing in the time of testing. This was true of the first disciples and it has been true of some disciples in every generation since.

Christians down through the ages have failed to honestly ask that simple question that has recently become so popular, "What would Jesus do?"

Would Jesus condone torture? Would Jesus condone denial of basic civil rights? Would Jesus stand by while his own people were being slaughtered?

The answers are obvious. But, how we answer these questions is not just a matter of knowledge. In the moment of trial it is also a matter of courage and spiritual maturity. We can know the right answer, but doing the right thing in specific situations is much more difficult.

And according to our passage for today, doing the right thing is the criteria by which we will be judged. Branches on the vine are judged by the fruit they produce. The more fruit produced the better the branch.

Many times Jesus told his disciples that we know the hearts of a people by their fruit. And disciples have a better chance of producing good fruit if they remain close to the vine.

ABIDE, AN OBSOLETE WORD?

Jesus put it this way. 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. I don't ever say to someone, "Come abide with me today." In fact the only time I use this word is when I preach on this passage.

But, in a way that's a shame because abide is 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.

We live in an age when communication is amazing. If you watch cars passing through an intersection you'll notice how every third person is talking on a cell phone as they drive.

And yet despite our advances in communication we seem more disconnected than ever.

I read this week about a woman named Mamie Adams. Mamie always went to the branch post office because the employees were so friendly. She went there to buy stamps before Christmas one year, and as you might expect the lines were really long.

A person in line with her helpfully suggested that she didn't have to wait in line. She could get her stamps from the machine in the lobby.

But, Mamie replied, "I know I could, but the machine wouldn't ask me about my arthritis!"

People are hungry for some sort of personal connection. And yet in our rapidly changing world nothing seems to abide.

"Classic" music is defined as last year's hits. 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, the cornerstone of the family 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 quite often 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.

LEARNING TO TAKE IN

The Bible tells us that there is one thing that abides forever. The Spirit of the living Christ abides in us forever.

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.

So how can we learn to abide in Christ? It is a matter of priorities. Our relationship with God must have the highest priority.

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 I repeated that advice 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.

PLANTED BY THE RIVER

When I lived in Virginia, we went through several periods of drought even worse than we have been experiencing in Central Florida recently. 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.

I have crepe myrtle trees in my front yard. Last year I was accused by my loved ones of committing crepe murder, cutting back the trees too much. But, they were wrong.

Even though I cut the trees back severely, I didn't kill them. In fact my trees are stronger and more beautiful than ever before. (In fact some of my neighbors' trees who were not pruned look terrible.)

Pruning, cutting away the dead wood and branches that are not helping the plant is an important part of being a good gardener.

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.

It looks like the pruning was too severe. But, from these severely pruned limbs 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 great clusters of grapes.”

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

And the same is true in our lives. Every year a season of pruning is necessary. Every year God must cut out of lives those things that are not needed and do not contribute to the kingdom and the glory of God.

We usually don't like this time of pruning. We wish that it weren't so. But, sometimes when we look back at our lives we can see how in the long run it was for the best.

THE WORD OF GOD

So how does this pruning take place in our life?
What kind of pruning shears does God use?

According to this passage, the pruning shears of God are the word, 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.

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 God often uses those negative experiences to bring about a positive result.

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. We say that into every life some rain must fall, but sometimes it seems like the rain never stops.

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, we have a selective memory. The rain doesn't always fall on us. We will 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 by our need to reconnect with our one true source of life and hope.

We make time for God because we realize that only God has the answer that we need.

THE LAST HYMN

This morning we're going to sing a hymn that we often sing at funerals. I must admit that it has a rather mournful tune, and for that reason I usually avoid using it.

But, after reading the story behind this hymn I have come to appreciate the power of its message.

The hymn, "Abide with Me" was written by an Englishman, Henry Lyte. He coined the memorable phrase, "It is better to wear out than to rust out."

And Henry lived by that motto. He wore out when he was only fifty-four years old after serving as pastor of a poor, small church in a fishing village for twenty-three years.

This hymn was written shortly before his death and it was inspired by what the two disciples said to Jesus on the road to Emmaus,

"Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent."

It was certainly evening in Henry's life. His life was nearing its end, but notice that he was also full of hope. Listen to the last line that has brought a sense of comfort to so many generations of Christians,

"Hold Thou thy cross before my closing eyes,
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies; Heaven's morning
breaks,
and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me."

I think there is a reason that Henry's words have been an inspiration to so many. He knew what it meant to abide in Christ. He spent a lifetime connecting and reconnecting himself to the True Vine.

And so when the evening of his life came, when the darkness was deepening and he felt that he was very much alone he remembered the promises of God. He remembered that indeed he was not alone in his hour of greatest need.

And that's the message I want you to hear this day. The Lord is still the "help of the helpless" (as the hymn puts it). Our Lord will never leave us or forsake us.

Do not despair when the rain comes. Abide in Christ, and he will abide in you.

Sometimes we talk about people who are well connected. We mean that these people have influential friends who make their life easier.

This passage teaches us that this could also be said of Christians. We are well connected people, but our connection is not with a rich uncle or influential friends. Our connection is with the true Vine, the one who is the way, the truth and the life.

Our confession tells us that in life and in death we belong to the God revealed in Jesus.

Without Him we can do nothing.

But, with Him nothing in all creation can separate us from His love and the hope that is ours in Christ Jesus.

Amen.