

John 15:1-8

“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 weren’t with us last week 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 to talk about this kingdom that comes.

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 this unfortunately did not always happen. God’s people often turned away from their unique calling to be a light to the nations. Instead, they wanted to be like the other nations with a king and a multitude of mini-gods.

And so in response to the reluctance of God’s people to play their role in God’s kingdom, the Lord created a new vine, a new source of hope. Jesus is this new vine, this true vine. And he brings a word of hope not only for the people of Israel but also for all the peoples of the world.

But, the measure of true faith in this new kingdom is not the rules and regulations of any religious group ... be it Christian, Jewish or any other faith. True faith is measured by the life and teachings of Jesus.

Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. In the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, we see a picture not only of what it means to be truly God; we also see a picture of what it means to be truly human. The life of Jesus is the pattern for our life. In him we receive forgiveness and are freed to live a life filled with joy and service.

BEARING FRUIT

But, have we lived up to our high calling in Christ Jesus? Do our actions conform to the example of the Master? Are we connected to God in what we do?

Do we bear fruit? That's the important question in our lesson for today.

Bearing fruit is mentioned six times in this brief passage. According to Jesus we are measured not by what we say but by what we do. The true disciples of Christ are known by their fruits.

And Jesus gave us this sobering picture of the final judgment. He said, "Not every who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father in heaven." (Matthew 7:20-21)

Someone once said that God has called us to be fruit inspectors. And I would suggest that we begin with our own branch.

Are we bearing fruit? Are our attitudes and actions in line with the life and ministry of Jesus? If not maybe there is something wrong in our life. Maybe our faith lacks power because it has no substance.

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.

Jesus is our connection to the Divine. And apart from the True Vine we can do nothing.

ABIDE

Job one then is to abide in Christ. Jesus told the disciples, "Abide in me as I abide in you."

It's important for us to remember when Jesus told his disciples to abide in him. Today's lectionary passage takes us back to Maundy Thursday. It's the Last Supper, and Jesus is giving what some have called his farewell discourse.

Soon Jesus will be taken from them; first by the cross and then by his ascension into heaven. What will these disciples need to remember as they preach the gospel in the post resurrection world? What should their priorities be?

Jesus tells them that they need to abide. They need to remain in fellowship with him and with each other.

Abide is not a word that we use much any more. But, maybe we should. Abide means to persevere, to continue, to last, to stay with.

No wonder that term is rare. Abide describes something that we don't often see in our time or in any other for that matter.

“STICKTOITNESS”

This old fashioned word, abide reminds me of a word one of my teachers made up when she was trying to get us to persevere in our studies, “sticktoitness.” She said that we needed more “sticktoitness.”

I'm not so sure that I was any more faithful in my studies, but I've never forgotten that made up word. And that made up word really describes what the Bible means by the word translated “abide”.

We don't really “stick to” much any more do we? Our world is marked by a lack of “sticktoitness”. We have more ways to communicate, but oddly enough we are more isolated than ever.

Not long ago I attended a gathering of ministers in the area. I purposely sat with some of the newer, younger ministers to get to know them. But, it didn't happen. I barely saw the whites of their eyes because their eyes were glued the whole time to the screens on their cell phones.

We live in a “virtual world” marked a lack of real commitment to anyone or anything. Many of us have the attention span of a fruit fly. Facebook friends cannot replace real flesh and blood friends. And talking about Jesus cannot replace knowing Jesus and following him.

PLANTED BY THE STREAM

The Greek word translated “abide” means not to depart, not to leave, to continue to be present, to maintain unbroken fellowship, to be constantly present to help. This word is most often used to describe the work of the Holy Spirit.

So, the most important relationship is our relationship with God. If we abide in God many things tend to fall in place. If we don't abide in God, we tend to dry up.

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 mighty New River ran through our area, and the trees and vegetation that grew along the banks of 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, and you are the branches." We derive our life and strength from the source, from the main vine.

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.

We often neglect God and God's word as revealed in Jesus. How can we know the truth about God if we do not spend time with God? How can we bear fruit if we are not connected to the vine, the true source of hope and salvation? Cut flowers might be fresh for a while, but all too soon they will wither and die.

PRUNING

But, despite the fact that we are often thoughtless and faithless, God continues to be faithful. The Bible tells us that the steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. (Lamentations 3:22-23)

Though we do not abide with God, God continues to abide with us. God continues to reach out to us despite our careless and thoughtless ways.

And one of the ways God reaches out to us is by judging us. God loves us too much to just leave us in our sin so God judges us.

You see God's love and God's justice are two sides of the same coin. There is love in God's judgment.

In today's lesson, the love and justice of God are illustrated by the pruning of the vine. Even those branches that produce fruit are pruned. None of the branches are spared the pruning process.

That's because pruning produces more fruit. And the dead wood that drains life from the vine is clipped off and prepared for the fire.

Jesus imagines a dynamic and changing life for the community of faith. Vines are pruned. The Word cleanses disciples. The church is constantly changing in response to the intervention of the God the vinedresser.

The Master Pruner cuts away dead branches and trims back productive branches in order that the work of the Kingdom might increase.

Now let's be honest.

The language is a bit scary. All this talk of pruning and burning up dead branches sounds a lot like condemnation.

But, isn't this what really happens when we are cut off from the source of true life?

When we are not connected to the Spirit of God as revealed in Christ, our life can often seem withered and useless.

We go down paths that are unproductive. We feel drained. We feel dried up and powerless.

The answer is pruning.

THE SHARP WORD OF GOD

What needs to be cut out of our life? Where do we need to repent and seek forgiveness?

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.

If you've ever seen pruned bushes, you know that it's not a pretty picture. Sometimes a pruned bush looks so ravaged that it's hard to believe it will ever bear fruit again.

But, cutting away dead growth is the only way for new life to take place. It's true with the fruit of the vine, and it's true with us as well.

FRUIT OF THE SPIRIT

Finally, how do we know that we're on the right track? What fruit do we bear when a just and loving God has pruned us? How do we know that we are abiding in Christ?

Jesus told his disciples in verse 7 that when they had been properly pruned and when they abide in him and his words, "... ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

It almost goes without saying that this does NOT mean we can ask God for a Mercedes Benz and our wish will be granted. I say it almost goes without saying because some fringe religious nuts that are saying just that these days.

(You may have noticed the sign in my office. God wants spiritual fruits not religious nuts. By the way, do you know there's even a Facebook page by that title? Amazing.)

But, what this verse does teach is this: when we align our will with God's will there is a sense of effortless power instead of powerless effort. When we truly trust in God and abide in His word, that faith will add power to our lives.

But what kind of power are we talking about? It is the power of service and humility. It is the power of love.

Pride gives rise to religious nuts. Humility gives rise to spiritual fruit-bearers. In our lesson for today Jesus reminds his disciples, "... apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5) And with one fell swoop Jesus deals a fatal blow to the root of our pride. It's not about us. It's about what God does through us.

The fruit of the Spirit is not the power of money or the power of position and privilege. It is the power of relationships, relationships that reflect the grace and forgiveness of God as revealed in Jesus Christ. It is the power of love.

A little later in this 15th chapter Jesus gives us the great commandment, that we should "love one another as I have loved you." (John 15:10) This love is the self-giving love of our Savior, a love born of sacrifice and service, a love that takes the form of a cross.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Galatians contrasted the ways of the world with the way of the cross. He said that those who live according to the flesh give in to self-indulgence and that leads to self-destruction.

But, those who live by the Spirit live in a different way. He wrote, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. There is no law against such things." (Galatians 5:22-23)

These are the fruits that God would have us bear. This is the way of life that keeps us out of the religious nut house.

God help us bear that fruit and glorify his name.

Amen.