

“Abide in My Love“

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John 15:1-11

“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. **9** As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **10** If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.

11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

ABIDING BY THE RIVER

Jesus gave his disciples a command. “Abide in my love.”

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 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,
if we abide in His love,
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 PLACE FOR EVERYONE

The word translated "abide" is the same word used in the 14th chapter of John when Jesus tells the disciples that he goes to prepare a place for them.

Jesus said that in his Father's house there will be (as the KJV translates it) "many mansions" (John 14:2)

The word translated "mansion" actually means something like "a place to abide".

To put it another way, the love of God creates a space for people...in this life and the life to come.

And the key to all this is love.
Love connects us to each other and to God in Christ.

In fact, love is defined by the life of Christ.

Jesus said he was going to prepare a place for his disciples to abide,
and furthermore the disciples knew the way to that place.

I AM THE WAY

At that point, Thomas piped up and said,
“Lord, we have no idea where you’re going.
How can we know the way?”

And Jesus replied,
“I am the way, and the truth, and the life.
No one comes to the Father except through me.”

So if we follow the way of Jesus,
if we abide in Jesus, we find God.

And the way of Jesus is the way of love.
Love is the house that grace built.
Love is that place where sinners are forgiven and restored.

GOD’S PURPOSE IN CHRIST

Earlier in John’s gospel, Jesus speaks with Nicodemus about what it means to be born again.
And he also tells Nicodemus the purpose of his ministry.

Let me paraphrase those famous words of Jesus a bit. He tells Nicodemus,

“God loves the world,
and God wants to redeem the world.

That's why he sent me.

God didn't send me into the world to condemn the world, but that through me the world might be saved. (See John 3:16-17)

Notice.

The love of God is not limited.
It is for the "world".

In fact in this passage the word translated "world" is even more inclusive.

The Greek word is "cosmos".
God's loves all of creation, the universe.

And God's love is universal.
It is not restricted.
It reaches out to the whole creation.

The Bible tells us that God is love.
And so if we are to abide in God's place,
we must abide in the place of love.

There's no other way to be near God.

To say it another way, love is the measure of godliness. (1 John 4:16)

THE VINE AND THE BRANCHES

So, practically speaking how do we do that?

Jesus gave his disciples a metaphor
to help them understand what abiding in love might look like.

He said,
"I am the vine,
and my Father is the vinegrower.
And you, disciples are like branches on the vine."

The branches won't bear any fruit unless they are attached to the vine.

And in the same way, disciples can't do anything useful for the kingdom of God unless they are attached to Jesus.

We have to abide in Jesus.
And when we do that Jesus abides in us.

This describes a very close relationship.
What can be closer than a branch's connection to the vine?

Remove a branch from the vine and the branch dies.

The vine is necessary for the life of the branch.
And our connection to the Lord is necessary if we are to live the abundant life that the Bible promises. (John 10:10)

To put another way, if we are to bear fruit,
if we are to live the life God meant for us to live,
we must abide in and participate in the love of Christ.

LOVE AND JUSTICE

In order for the vine to bear fruit abundantly,
the vine grower also needs to get rid of the dead wood.

Those of you who are gardeners know this.
If you just let a grape vine grow wild,
it's not nearly as productive.

This seems like a word of judgment.

If a branch does not abide in the vine,
if a branch becomes disconnected from Jesus,
then it dries up and needs to be thrown into the fire.

How are we to understand this?

Like all passages it needs to be understood in the context of the whole.
What does the gospel of John say about the purpose of God in Christ?

Well, in John 3:16-17 we have already learned that God loves the world. God didn't send his Son into the world to condemn the world.

He sent his Son so the world might be saved.

But, sometimes God saves us by pruning and burning the dead wood in our life.

The Bible teaches us that love and justice are two sides of the same coin.

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.

THE CHURCH REFORMED

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.

Sometimes in order to bear the fruit of God's love the church has had to change.

In the past, we've had to destroy some old practices in order to grow and revitalize the life of the church.

For example, the motto of the Reformation was
"the church reformed and always reforming according to the Word of God."

And of course the Word of God is most clearly revealed in the Word made flesh,
God's Son, Jesus.

And when our life becomes disconnected from that Word,

we too need reformation.
We need to be re-formed.
We need to become new creations in Christ Jesus.

PRUNING IS A PROCESS THAT CONTINUES

Today's lesson suggests that this is a process.

While cutting my grass this past week, I noticed that once again some of my bushes needed to be trimmed yet again. It's a never ending process.

And so, just as we have to cut away the dead wood each year for the health of the plant, so the people of God are forced to re-evaluate and re-order their priorities each new season.

Even the disciples who first heard this message did not always abide with Jesus.

They doubted.
They ran away at the first sign of trouble.

From time to time they too had to re-evaluate and reform.

In the book of Acts we see this pattern clearly.

Despite remarkable growth in numbers and powerful signs of the Spirit, the early church struggled to believe and remain true to the faith.

When the Apostle Paul was in prison, soon to be executed, he wrote a letter to Timothy.

He lamented the fact that many former disciples had left the faith.

Churches had closed.

Friends had become enemies of the apostle

...and enemies of the gospel.

But, Paul concludes by saying,

“Despite all this, I trust in the one who called me.

I know that one day God is going to make things right.” (See 2 Timothy 1:12)

Death and resurrection.

Doubt and faith.

Backsliding and reformation.

This was the pattern for the very first disciples and it has continued to be a pattern throughout the history of the church.

In the middle of struggle and faithlessness, disciples of Jesus are directed back to the source of their life and hope.

God, through the Spirit of the risen Christ, brings reformation and new life to God’s people ...over and over and over again.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, we see this same motif.

God’s people reject God’s Word, the Word that comes to them through the law and the prophets.

And eventually they are judged
...they are pruned
...by being forced to wander in the wilderness
or by Exile in Babylon for instance.

But, in each case, in the long run,
judgment leads not to death
but to a new opportunity to be God's people.

These times of judgment caused people to think about what they had done
wrong and change their ways.

They went back to the Torah and the writings of the prophets.

They reformed their worship and their priorities.
They sought to live closer to the God who had so graciously redeemed
them from slavery and exile.

And this needs to be our pattern as well.

When we are pruned by the challenges and problems that confront us,
when we suddenly become aware of our failures and our sinful ways,
we recommit ourselves to go back to the source.

We go back to Jesus, to the Word made flesh,
and we abide with him.

Together we seek to understand more clearly what God in Christ would
have us do and be.

And like the Apostle Paul we trust not in "success", however we might mea-
sure it.

We trust in the one in who has called us, knowing that He is able to see us
through to the end.

And one day, one glorious day, the dim reflection of hope that we see now
will become a face to face encounter with glory. (1 Corinthians 13:12)

WE WILL NEVER BE ORPHANS

The gospels were written several years after the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. According to many scholars, the gospel of John may have even been written toward the end of the first century.

And the congregations who first read John's gospel were facing a crisis. They were being thrown out of the synagogues on account of their teachings about Jesus.

This was very difficult for them.

The early church didn't see itself as a new religion. They saw themselves as a fuller expression of the Jewish faith.

But, now these believers were on their own. They felt disconnected from their heritage and perhaps in some cases, even their family and friends.

How could they survive in a hostile world without the support of a community of faith?

The gospel of John pointed them back to these last words that Jesus gave his disciples.

They needed to cling to the teachings of Jesus. And they needed to cling to each other.

Jesus was the vine.

Jesus was the true source of hope and comfort.

Jesus provided the abiding place for lost souls who felt displaced and out of place.

This time of rejection would not be a time when they would lose faith.

Instead, these difficulties would have a cleansing effect.

Pruning the old way of life would help them bear more fruit, and follow the way of Jesus more closely.

Down through the years, John's gospel has been especially helpful to Christians who have had to mourn the loss of the old way of life. John reminds his readers that God in Christ is always creating a new place for His people to abide.

We will never be alone.
We will never be abandoned.
We will never be like orphans.

The Spirit of God in Christ goes with us every step of the way.

The Spirit of God in Christ gives us comfort in our time of trial.

The Spirit of God in Christ teaches us the meaning of love.

The Spirit of God in Christ fills us with joy.

(See John 14:18-27)

TRUSTING IN THE VINEGROWER

Notice that none of this is something that we do.
Branches can't decide to prune themselves.
Branches can't decide to bear more fruit.

All a branch can do is hang in there...or abide!

This is probably where the metaphor,
like all metaphors breaks down a little bit.

We're more than just branches on a tree.
We're disciples.
We consciously decide to hang in there, to abide.

Why?
Because we trust in the goodness of the vine grower.

We trust in the goodness of God.

We believe that God through the Spirit and the teachings of Christ connects us to the root and source of all life.

And when we are cast out by others,
when the dead parts of our life get pruned away,
we don't despair.

We don't resign and quit.

We reform.
We get in step with the kingdom that comes
...on earth as well as in heaven.

We look forward to a great harvest.
We anticipate even more fruit in the future.

We trust.
We abide,
We have faith in the promise of God's eternal love.

We are empowered by the Spirit to follow the Great Commandment given by Jesus.

We love God and we love our neighbor as ourself.

EFFORTLESS POWER

In our passage Jesus told his disciples,
"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,
ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

I would point out that this is a conditional clause.
The "if" is very important.

If the disciples abide in Jesus and his words abide in them,....then they will be able to have their wishes granted.

The wishes of the disciples will be granted because they will be in line with the will of God in Christ.

That is what will make their ministry powerful and effective.

I read a golf instruction book once that promised a golf swing that would produce “effortless power instead of powerless effort”.

Sadly I’m afraid my swing still produces powerless effort. Maybe I didn’t read the book carefully enough!

But, it is true that when we abide in the words and Spirit of Jesus, life takes on the feeling of effortless power instead of powerless effort.

This power is the power of relationships that reflect the grace and forgiveness of God.

This power is the power of love
...God’s love as revealed in Jesus.

This morning I want you to ask yourself a question,

“Is my life filled with powerless effort?
Do I feel like I’m working harder and harder, but nothing seems to work?
Do I feel like my life bears no fruit?”

Maybe it’s time to think about reformation.
Maybe there’s some dead wood in your life that God is going to remove.

Maybe there’s some change that you need to make in order to draw closer to the Lord.

You’ll know when that happens.
Instead of your life being filled with powerless effort,
your life will be filled with effortless power.

That’s the power of love.

Jesus said, “Abide in my love.”
May God help us do just that.

Amen.