

Abide in Me as I Abide in You
John 15: 1-11
August 13, 2017

Kristie Finley
First Presbyterian Church
Lake Forest, Illinois

This morning's scripture is found in the 15th chapter of the Gospel of John. It is part of Jesus' farewell discourse. Jesus has washed the feet of the disciples and told them he is leaving. He has told them this before, but here he is making it clear that it is immanent, and he leaves them with words of comfort. Not a list of rules to follow, he leaves them with a vision of how to continue in community with him through their relationships with each other.

Hear the word of the Lord: **John 15:1-11**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Please pray for illumination. We give thanks, O God of sacred stories, for the witness of Holy Scripture. Through it, you nurture our imaginations, touch our feelings, increase our awareness, and challenge our assumptions. Bless we pray, our hearing of your word this day. Speak to each of us; speak to all of us; and grant that by the power of your Holy Spirit, we may be hearers and doers of your word. Amen.

This prayer of illumination invites us into the exploration of the scripture. I hope our imaginations will be nurtured, our feelings will be touched, our awareness will be increased, and our assumptions will be challenged. Jesus was about all these things.

So on this, the last night the disciples were with Jesus, they gathered around him, and they must have been so fearful. Can you imagine the questions they would have? How will we continue without our leader, our teacher, the one we gave up everything for? We've tried so hard to comprehend and follow, but we trip up over and over again. Having slipped so often, how will we pick ourselves up if he is not there to reach out to us, to catch us? And what will happen when our weak faith surfaces again, will we again be forgiven even when we are separated from him?

The words Jesus speaks are meant to bring them comfort. He tells them that they have been cleansed already, pruning has already taken place. Much of this cleansing was painful. The disciples had to let go of pretty much their whole world view, and lifestyle to be a disciple of Jesus. Most were cut off from family, either by belief in Jesus as the messiah or by being physically removed; some have literally walked away from their families. They have given up their livelihoods as fisherman, farmers, and tax collectors. But it would be comforting to hear that the cleansing had already taken place.

Following Jesus has been a radical turn from all they know. It is just the beginning of a mission that would continue and be synonymous with radical reordering, reforming. A socially disruptive work that they had seen firsthand. The disciples might have felt that they just wanted to stay there with him. Is that why Jesus paints the picture of them just being together with him and God. Not a list of rules to follow, just to keep close, feel his presence so that they could feel it again when he was gone.

And the people of John's community, in hearing this about the branch that withers and dies, and is cut off? They have already experienced this as Christian Jews who had originally been a part of the Synagogue. They had been cast off, sent away from their community for being followers of Christ. They would be frightened at what more they might lose; or doubted their own ability to remain faithful. At that time being cut off from your family meant the loss of identity, and community. So abiding in the vine would give them an identity again.

So Jesus speaks to their imaginations. He presents them with the image of the vineyard. Something they would understand. They would understand how the vineyard is a source of life. If the vine is to produce fruit, it must be nurtured and tended to lovingly by the vine grower. And the vine needs to provide nurture to the branches in order for them to produce fruit.

The flow of connection to the disciples would be obvious. God is the diligent nourisher ever present and aware of what the vine and through the vine, the branches need to produce fruit. The vine grower knows what each needs. Jesus touches their emotions as he speaks of the love God has for him, and his love for God and the disciples, and their love for each other, and their love for Jesus and God. They would see the cycle of growth, and themselves as a part of it. They just might grasp an understanding of how they will not be left adrift, and how this will enable them to make new disciples – to increase the fruit, if they stay connected and abide in what Jesus has taught them. For us hearing this today, it seems as if not much has changed for those called to be disciples. We carry fear with us. We may not physically leave our families, but we can feel cast off, even cut off. Even within our church, where we read and teach about the love that connects us to God and Christ, it can be hard for us to see that life force flowing as in the vine.

Views in the world have become so polarized that we often can't even have conversations with each other. Even when we are in the same church or

community, even with those we love. In our individualistic culture it is hard to see how we are to abide in the vine, with Christ, with that brother or sister who we feel totally separated from, ideologically or politically. Within our own denomination we have seen splits, people cutting off. The news in Charlottesville, VA is heartbreaking, and maddening. Will we never get the idea of peace? Not merely getting along, but the peace Christ offers us. Where hatred and intimidation are not acceptable. So many of our views are held so closely, they actually hold our identity, and we can only think to withdraw from each other. If we are followers of Jesus, that radical lover of all people, we cannot withdraw from situations that do not offer a glimpse of that love. Christ is our identity, if we are abiding in the Christ that is the vine, love for him, each other and our neighbor is the only response we can have. We must be the glimpse of love the world is offered. It is even more important now to abide, dwell together, to be connected.

Abiding runs counter to our individualistic culture. To be connected to the vine we need dependence and interdependence, not to be independent. Having mutual respect for all, offering love and hope, and believing in the ongoing presence of Christ. This is what community, mission, and discipleship look like.

If we use a different word for abide, such as dwell, or as Eugene Peterson translates in the Message, “to find our home in Christ” it can be easier to imagine. I took a break from sermon writing yesterday and went through my email, something that definitely needs pruning. I came upon the renewal for a magazine I subscribe to. It is Dwell Magazine and the word alone formed a connection. Dwell is advertised as “the best place to design your modern home or apartment.” Many of you know that I was an interior designer before I was called to ministry, and boy can I dwell in that magazine. I can get lost in the innovative designs. Everything disappears for a while. This made me reflect on how our awareness is heightened when we are totally absorbed. The

feelings are even stronger when it is in an experience with people we love. We may not remember what we did in detail, but we remember the distinct feelings associated with the event, they stay with us. Think of a time when your attention and imagination were heightened so that you were totally absorbed. This is what abiding is. It is about relationship and connecting. Christ is not asking us to do something that is depleting, but life giving when he says “abide in me.”

We think that abiding is hard, well, the pruning can be unimaginable. We strive for perfection and pruning becomes a looming fear that if we don't get it right, then it will be cut off, we fail. We see pruning as a punishment or judgement. Maybe we should challenge that assumption and see pruning as a letting go, simplifying and getting rid of what is not needed or useful, of those things that get in the way of our abiding. But when we remain faithful it is not failure, it's growth.

The branch cannot escape pruning if it bears fruit. Jesus says “Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Pruning allows the fruitful branches to be even more fruitful. I fear that we hear “pruning” as a negative, but here, in relation to the branches it is for a more fruitful bounty. Pruning becomes a part of a faithful life. In vine growing, cuttings, the pruned parts, can be grafted onto the vine to grow new branches. With God, even what needs to be pruned can become new. We do not do the pruning, but we need to do some maintenance of our branches. We might need to clear away some space.

Nate Stucky, taught a class in seminary on Sabbath. And it speaks to this pruning, or letting go. The first day of class we watched a video from Sesame Street. It seemed as strange to us that day as it must to you now. A classful of master's students watching a children's show. I wish I could play it for you, because the song they sing says it all. And believe me you do not want me to do the singing. The story is about Ernie and his desire to play the saxophone.

Ernie does not understand why the saxophone squeaks every time he tries to play. Mr. Hoots, the sax playing band leader, tells Ernie that he has to put down the ducky to play the saxophone. He can't play with the ducky in his hand too. Something that Ernie loves is keeping him from doing something new. Nate gave us each a rubber ducky to remind us of this message. The message was that we all have so much going on in our lives, that we need to make room, to put something down so that we could practice Sabbath, spend time with God. Time to abide.

What pruning lessons can you recall? Gentle ones where it is made clear that there is something we can set aside so that we can get on with the ministry we are called to. Or some tougher ones where we have to make a hard pivot in direction to hold fast to the vine? Our pruning may be so that we can make room for something else, which just might be abiding with Christ and each other.

As we need to remember to hand the pruning over to God, we also have to remember that the bounty is God's as well. We can't compete for who has the most bounty, because the bounty is not produced by us individually. The bounty comes from the nourishment of God's tending through Christ, the Vine. We abide in the vine together and the vine abides in us together, we produce the bounty together.

The disciples were afraid after Jesus' arrest, when he was no longer with them. They scattered, but they came back together. Through his love for them, and their love for him they continued to abide in Christ and each other. And the fruitful bounty this abiding produced changed the world. The beauty of this abiding is that the connection, the relationship continues even when we are apart.

This is all about our dependence on the vine grower, and the vine. It is not about what any one of us can do on our own, no matter how strongly one might feel that it is. It is also about our interdependence with each other, about

relationships, about community. This is precarious work. We will be exposed, vulnerable, people will be able to judge us when we are fruitful. Exposure is hard for a self-reliant culture. Jesus wants us, just as he did for the disciples, to know that this is hard work, being his disciples. That it takes all of us together, nourished by God's tending, and Christ's love, to do his work.

The scriptures give us many examples of abiding. The story of Martha and Mary in Luke 10:38-42 gives a clear message of the importance of abiding in Christ especially when we get distracted and think "how can I abide, I have so much to do." Jesus is in the home of Martha and Mary, Mary is sitting at the feet of Jesus, listening to his teaching. Martha is upset because she is doing all the work. But Jesus answers her, saying "Martha, Martha, you are worried and distracted by many things;⁴² there is need of only one thing. Mary has chosen the better part, which will not be taken away from her." I would like to think that in light of today's passage, that Mary might have said to Martha, "Come and sit with us, and after I will help with the work." So that Martha and Mary could abide with Jesus, and each other.

If we abide in Christ and each other, we will choose the better thing, and it will not be taken from us. We will be strengthened through the love of God and Christ. We can see active visible signs. As in the ordination and installation of John Noble as deacon last Sunday. When the elders and deacons and clergy came forward to lay hands on him, there abundance of people coming forward who trailed down the aisles. Now there is an image of branches, and those branches bear fruit through the nourishing love of God the vine grower and Christ the vine, and us the disciples who are send out into the world to bear more fruit. This challenges the assumption of many that our faith is dying, or that we are cut off. We are a community that is connected to each other, fed by our nourishing God through the vine that is Christ growing and moving ever outward into the world. Amen.