

“Abiding and Bearing Fruit”

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John 15:1-17 (NRSV)

¹I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The last house my family lived in in Tennessee had some fairly large trees in the back yard, and over the years, we had some storms come through which did some damage to those trees. During one storm, a big limb – maybe a foot in diameter – snapped off and fell to the ground. It was then that a funny thing happened: that limb died. The leaves on it withered and began to fall off. The limb stayed right there in the back yard for a while because I didn't own a chainsaw at the time and had to wait for someone to help me out with it. While waiting for someone to do something about it, that limb continued to wither. Before long, there were no leaves at all hanging on to the limb and the limb itself started to deteriorate. Strange how that happened, isn't it? Just because that limb was no longer attached to the tree from which it came, it stopped producing new leaves, those leaves that were there dried up and fell off, and the limb itself started to rot. Just because it was not attached to the tree anymore!

I guess that's not that surprising to you – and I admit, I'm not that clueless. I was not really surprised when the fallen limb deteriorated. That's the way things work, after all. A limb no longer connected to the tree – to the roots which nourish it – will die. Jesus told us that we are all the same as that limb. He used a slightly different analogy – that of a vine and branches, but he was saying the same thing to us. Jesus was telling us that we are not of any use away from the vine. Just as that limb withered and died without being attached to the tree, so do we wither and die without being attached to Jesus. Jesus even said “apart from me you can do nothing.”

We all have to stay connected to the vine in order to be of use. And that vine runs right through the church that Jesus founded. The church, with all its warts and blemishes, should be the centering point of our lives.

In her memoir, *Traveling Mercies*, Anne Lamott writes about why she stays so close to her church. In one story she tells about a 7 year old girl who got lost. “The little girl ran up and down

the streets of the big town where they lived, but she couldn't find a single landmark. She was frightened. Finally a policeman stopped to help her. He put her in the passenger seat of his car, and they drove around until she finally saw her church. She pointed it out to the policeman, and then she told him firmly, 'You can let me out now. This is my church, and I can always find my way home from here.'

Lamott writes, "And that is why I have stayed so close to mine - because no matter how bad I am feeling, how lost or lonely or frightened, when I see the faces of the people at my church, and hear their voices, I can always find my way home."

In Christianity now, there is a large emphasis on a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ." Now, I'm not knocking that. A person's individual walk with their Lord and Savior is vitally important. But it is not all. It is not all, by far. When all we focus on is our "personal relationship with Jesus," then we turn faith into an individual matter only, and that is counter to what the scriptures tell us. When we narrow our religion down to just us and Jesus, then we have a tendency to reform Jesus in *our* image. We end up with a version of Jesus that doesn't challenge us because we have this Jesus who just silently agrees with us. Paul described the church as a body. We are all part of the same body, and cannot say that we do not need other parts. We cannot take Jesus outside of the church and truly understand what He is teaching us. We come to church – online or in person – to be nurtured *and challenged* by one another. We come to church to fellowship and worship. We come to church because the church is the bride of Jesus and He called us to be here. But, we don't just "come to church," we, together, *are* the church. We must stay connected to the vine, to all of the branches around us.

Jesus told His disciples something else, though. He told them that in order to make them bear *more* fruit, God prunes them back. That's one I struggle with. I'm not one who likes to prune

trees or shrubs or other growing things. I usually like to let nature take its course. I prefer to let trees just grow and grow, in whatever way they happen to grow. I've had people tell me that a little judicious pruning would help the trees, and maybe I wouldn't have lost so many limbs in that yard in Tennessee had I done so, but it's really pretty disheartening to me to see a tree or even a shrub that has been pruned. I just don't like seeing something that had been growing big suddenly cut back to much less than it was. I always like to think that I'm letting God take care of things by letting them grow naturally. But this passage tells us that God does think some pruning ought to be done. Those of you who are better horticulturists than I already know that. You know that pruning something back causes new shoots to come forth. There is much more growth in the proper direction for the plant's well being if a plant has been pruned than in something left to grow on its own. Left untended, little sucker shoots grow, dispersing the life and vitality of the vine so that it produces little fruit. Jesus knew this and His audience knew it, when He said to them, "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

The question is, what is it that needs pruning in our lives? There are always activities in our lives that are not really that useful to the kingdom of God. Perhaps it is excessive television watching or time surfing the Internet. Perhaps it's time on social media or getting pulled in to the latest gossip. Perhaps it is any variety of activities that are not used for God's glory. Every one of us has such activities, and perhaps some of them should be pruned.

But, I'm not sure that is what Jesus was talking about here. He said that God prunes branches that are already bearing fruit. He seems to be speaking of pruning back productive things! Sometimes we are guilty of living like the bumper sticker that said "Jesus is coming. Look busy!" Sometimes, we are more concerned about keeping busy toiling away for the kingdom than about spending time with God. In this passage, Jesus spoke about bearing fruit. One pastor says it

this way, “we need to learn the difference between productivity and fruitfulness.” All too often, we are ruled by our schedules. We are busy running from activity to activity, busy being productive, without really considering if we are being fruitful. The important thing is to bear fruit for the kingdom of God, not to fill all of our days with busy-ness. Henri Nouwen, a priest and author said, “We have been called to be fruitful--not successful, not productive, not accomplished ... (fruitfulness is) the realization that I am worth more than the sum total of all my efforts.”

Mother Teresa of Calcutta once was asked, “How do you measure the success of your work?” She looked puzzled for a moment and then replied, “I don't remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness in Love. This is the only success that counts.”

We are called not to be productive or successful, but to bear fruit. Sometimes, the best thing we can do with our time is to sit alone in the silence and commune with God. Is that something that we would really call “productive?” No. It is what the world would call *un-productive*. That time could be better spent doing *something* for the church, right? Well, no. Jesus went away from the crowds to spend time alone with God, and so should we. It enables us to come back refreshed and with a better sense of what *should* be done for God's kingdom, of what we can do to bear the most fruit. Sometimes, the best thing we can do is just to “abide.”

Abide is a word we don't really use much these days. But Jesus used it repeatedly in the passage we read today. In those seventeen verses, Jesus said “abide” eleven times. My favorite Bible paraphrase, *The Message*, translates verse 4 as “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.” I like that paraphrase. Live in Jesus. Make your home in Jesus, just as Jesus does in us. It means to remain somewhere or to continue to be somewhere or something or to endure. We abide in Jesus by living our lives in and through Him. We abide in Jesus by entering into His loving embrace for all time. We abide by simply *being* in Jesus. Abiding is not an action; it is a state of

being. We don't abide by keeping busy. We abide by resting in Jesus. We abide by remaining connected to Jesus and the branches of the church so that we can bear fruit for God's kingdom.

So, today I invite us to abide in Jesus. Let us not worry so much about *doing* the right thing or accomplishing everything on our to-do lists. Just be. Let us relax in the presence of Jesus, in the presence of our fellow believers. May we allow God to prune back those things that, while they may be good and productive, may not be required for the kingdom, or may not be required for us. May we let God prune back those things that stand in the way of new growth, of new fruit, so that we may abide in Jesus and together bear fruit for God's kingdom. Amen