

GOSPEL READING: John 15:1-8

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"I 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^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed^[b] 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^[c] my disciples.

Holy wisdom, holy word. Thanks be to God.

EPISTLE READING: 1 John 4:7-10,16-21

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⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins...God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them. ¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love^[a] because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters,^[b] are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister^[c] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters^[d] also. *This is the word of the Lord...Thanks Be to God.*

“Abiding”

Today we come to the final *ego emai*, “I am” statement of Jesus. Can you remember the others? The Bread, the Light, the Gate/Door, the Good Shepherd, the Resurrection & Life, the Way, Truth & Life. Here, in his “Farewell Discourse” to his disciples, he said, “I am the Vine”.

Now I am not a horticulturalist. In fact, I am simply horrible at growing any plants, nothing green except possibly mold, but I understand a couple of things about vines and vineyards. First, in a vineyard it seems that the best fruit, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine.¹ That is where the most nutrients are. Second, left alone, the lateral vine branches will eventually grow in on themselves, cutting off their own light. They will attach themselves to other things too, resulting in a rambling, tangled mess. Consequently, for these reasons, a vinedresser, a caretaker of a vineyard, is needed. They do the job of removing the lifeless unproductive branches and pruning (cleaning) the living branches which are growing off of the central vine. Both of these actions serve to conserve the energy of the whole plant so it can produce more fruit.

Scripture is filled with the imagery of vines and vineyards. In most of the passages, Israel is represented as “God’s vineyard” and God is the Vinedresser, but here in his goodbye speech to his disciples, Jesus said that he is the True Vine (the one who really does God’s work in the world...offering compassion, forgiveness, justice, peace), and he said that his followers are the branches. The intent of the analogy was to give the disciples comfort, to leave with them a picture of their relationship with him and each other, a picture of an unquestionable connectedness. If they remained faithful, close to the central vine, they would bear good fruit, to do God’s work together in the world. Jesus would live again and be with them no matter what, no matter what trials they would have to face.

Now, Jesus’ words of comfort were also important for the community to whom John wrote shortly thereafter. They were Jewish CHRISTIANS, and, as such, they were being rejected by their friends and families. They were being excluded from their Temple...all because they

¹Nancy Blakely. “Pastoral Perspective: Jn 15:1-8” In: D Bartlett, BB Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Yr B, Vol 2* (Louisville: WJKP; 2008), 472-5

accepted this man, Jesus, as the Jewish Messiah. How devastating it must have been. They lost community. The center of their lives was gutted. Here John used Jesus' words to reframe their perspective from feeling lonely and cut down, to being instead pruned or cleansed² by the DIVINE Vinedresser for the purpose of bearing more fruit. They could now realize that they were not cut off from the source of their joy and strength, Jesus. As they abided in him, so he would abide in them. Abiding in Greek (*meno*) means "enduring", "withstanding", "remaining steadfast", "being present with". Jesus abided, was present with them, no matter what, no matter what trials they would have to face.

And like the disciples and like John's audience, today's followers too can find great comfort in this text, especially as hardships come our way, as we face life's challenges individually or as a church. For example: *the single mom who is struggling to work two jobs but yet give quality time to her kids may feel as though she is being cut down, mown down; the recently widowed woman who is overwhelmed each day with the quietness of the house; the man whose company down-sizes and lets him go a year before his retirement; the congregation which is experiencing a dwindling membership; the kid who is being bullied and beginning to believe what THEY say, the caregiver of a spouse or child with a crippling disease, the church which feels pressure to forget its mission and accommodate to the world...all of these are feeling the sting of life's cutting trials.* But Jesus says that if the trials are understood instead as a pruning, a cleansing, which occurs as we all simply live in Christ, and if we stay connected to him and each other through them, we will be nourished and strengthened to not give in but to hold the course! "Abide in me AS I abide in you," Jesus says. He lives and gives us greater clarity, more energy, less distraction, and fewer wrong turns. We will then bear more fruit (i.e. do greater acts of charity and compassion for those who are also suffering). We will gain support and energy from our connectedness, becoming more understanding, more courageous and having deeper insight to speak out for justice and peace, to proclaim the gospel. I love the old African

² David Lose. "Easter 5B: As I Abide in You" In: In the Meantime. <http://www.davidlose.net/2018/04/easter-5-b-as-i-abide-i-you/> (accessed 4/26/2018).

proverb, *“Because we are, I am”*.³ Friends, Jesus is present with us as we are present with each other no matter what, no matter what trails we face.

*Columnist Sheila Graham had a compelling interview with Ruby Bridges Hall sometime back. If you recall, Ruby was the first-grade girl who in Nov 1960 was the first African-American child to integrate her New Orleans grade school. In the interview, Ruby explained that it wasn't until much later, when a boy told her why he couldn't play with her, that she understood that she was the reason for all the commotion which surrounded her each day....an armed federal marshal escort, angry mobs shouting at her, children being moved from her school to others. Ms. Graham asked her how it was that she was able to bear it? She said, "the one thing my mother always said to me was that when she couldn't be with me, if I was ever afraid, I should say my prayers. Even at night, if I would wake up from a nightmare and go to her room, my mother would ask, 'Did you say your prayers?' That stuck with me. It's where I got the strength. I always knew someone cared for me."*⁴ (Long pause)

You may have heard other people, other churches in fact, interpret this text differently. *“Abide I me or ELSE!---wither, be thrown into the fire, die”*.⁵ These words are sometimes used to elicit dread and fear or to insist on exclusivity of those who are judged not to bear good fruit. But the comments about withering and fire are, brothers and sisters, statements of fact, not threat. As Karoline Lewis of Luther seminary says, *“These are consequences of separation, not statements about a lack of righteousness. They describe the reality of disconnection, not the determination of who is in and who is out.”*⁶ People who hide from God, churches which follow societal rather than gospel direction, or people who think they can do it all on their own, (what our society of individualism and self-help encourages), ...they all separate themselves from the source of love and acceptance, guidance and strength. As simply a matter of fact, they grow not outwardly but inwardly onto themselves, making a tangled mess. They may profess faith but fail to live in love or bear good fruit, attaching themselves instead to shallow, temporary things

³ B J Essex. *“Homiletical Perspective: Jn 15:1-8”* In: D Bartlett, BB Taylor, eds. *Feasting on the Word, Yr B, Vol 2* (Louisville:WJKP; 2008), 472-5.

⁴ King Duncan. *“Collected Sermons”* <https://sermons.com/home/illustrations/2018-04-29>. (accessed 4/27/18).

⁵ David Lose.

⁶ Karoline Lewis. *“On Withering”* <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post+5137>. (accessed 4/27/18).

such as money, jobs, alcohol, drugs, the praise of others, titles, comfortable lifestyles, corporate ladders. They become disconnected from the healthy vines of the vineyard and from the central vine, himself. And because of this, they slowly wither away like cut flowers. In the end, they need be cleared out by the vinedresser.

I am reminded of a good story, worth repeating. *A member of a church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him. It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. The man welcomed him, led him to a big chair near the fireplace. The pastor sat but said nothing. In the grave silence, they both contemplated the play of the flames around the burning logs. After some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone. Then he sat back in his chair, still silent. The host watched all this in quiet fascination. As the one lone ember's flame diminished, it became cold and grey, "dead as a doornail." Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. Just before the pastor was ready to leave, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately it began to glow once more with the light and warmth of the burning coals around it. As the pastor reached the door to leave, his host said, " I shall be back in church next Sunday."*⁷

Friends, these words of Jesus were gifted to the disciples, John's community, Christians over the centuries, and now to us to comfort, reassure and encourage. They are words of promise and providence, given to remind us that no matter what, no matter what trials we are facing, Jesus is with us. "They are words which need to be shared, whether shouted from the rooftops or whispered in a moment of tender, vulnerable stillness."⁸ Our challenge, our challenge is to live into them...to stay connected to, to abide in the True Vine and in each other. Our challenge is to produce full leaves and large beautiful fruit, a bountiful harvest of love for our God in God's world. *"I am the true vine, you are the branches," he said. "Abide in me as I abide in you."* Amen.

⁷ John MacArthur. <http://www.inspirationalarchive.com/texts/topics/evangelization/lonelyember.shtml>. (accessed 4/27/18).

⁸ David Lose.