



Roanoke, Virginia  
May 6, 2018

***“Abide”***

*John 15:1-13*

Rev. Rachel C. Thompson

**1** “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. **12** “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. **13** No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.

Viticulture is a new word I learned this week – it comes from the Latin word for vine, and it means the cultivation and the science of the cultivation of grapevines. As you may be able to guess, before this week, I did not know a lot about viticulture.

My habit with plants is to plant them and give them a little water, stick them in the sun, and pray that maybe something will grow from the seeds I haphazardly stuck in the dirt. We had several plants over in the Intersection this year and I’m sorry to confess that none of them have made it through the year alive. Elizabeth left me in charge of the cactus in her office while she’s on leave, so if you all would say a prayer or two about that I’m sure the cactus would be grateful.

As if to prove my point, when Glen and I arrived in the sanctuary this morning, we found that the beautifully arranged flowers had fallen off the table and were scattered all over the floor. We did our best to salvage what we could and collected them in vases, but please don’t

blame Susan Lancaster or Ann Lawson for whatever is going on back there. The blame is on me. And regardless of their arrangement, the flowers are still gorgeous, so glory to God!

I can't claim to have a green thumb, but I found what I learned about viticulture to be fascinating. Fortunately for me, one of my roommates has worked on farms and taken some classes and taught at camp about vines and how they grow, so I spent some time this week listening in fascination as Nina shared some of her viticulture knowledge with me.

She talked about pruning, how even a healthy and strong vine needs to be pruned, so that it will produce good fruit. I learned about irrigation, and how unlike many other things you might grow, for grapes you don't want to have to water them that much, because if that's their main source of water, their roots will be shallow because they receive that life right from the surface. You want to grow grapes in a climate where there will be enough rain and water deep in the ground so that their roots will grow down and the plant will have a strong foundation. She taught me about grafting, how you can take a root that has grown strong and deep into the ground, and then take another vine and graft it onto this root stock, this strong foundation so that the grapes that grow on the new vine will have a water source that runs deep.

It's a complicated business, growing vines, managing a vineyard. It requires wisdom, dedication, extensive labor and skill. It requires a vine grower who knows she is doing.

I imagine that in Jesus' day, some of the methods and techniques of viticulture were slightly different than they are today, but not all that much has changed. The metaphor still works the same way. And Jesus sure knows how to use a good metaphor. He says, "I'm the vine. My father is the vinegrower. I'm the vine, you're the branches, abide in me and bear fruit!"

Jesus gives us this image of what it means to be part of his family. Each one of us, we're like a branch growing off of a strong and deeply rooted vine. There will be times of harvest and times of pruning, but the vine that we belong to is growing in a vineyard, tended by a vine grower who knows exactly what to do.

What a powerful metaphor. The trouble with metaphors, though, which is also their beauty, is that it takes a little extra work to figure out what to do with them. What does it mean? Jesus says, "I'm the vine, abide in me." But how do we do that? How do we respond? What does it mean to abide in Jesus?

For starters, "abide" is just a fancy way of translating an incredibly common Greek verb, that outside of the work of John basically just means to stay. Remain. Live there. Stop there. Stay there. Stay put. I think translators like to use the word "abide" to translate the verb in this context because it seems to convey some of the theological weight of the point that Jesus is making. And Jesus is doing something new in this passage because he's asking his followers to stay put in him, a person, not in a location or a place.

It's like when you have a relationship with a friend or a partner, you both have to be in it for it to work. You have to stay put in that relationship. Sometimes that's easy to do and sometimes that's harder, but when one person decides they're not in anymore, you can tell. It's like a vine that hasn't been grafted properly. The fruit doesn't grow right.

But when a vine has been grafted properly, you can tell based on its fruit.

There's a science project I did back in elementary school, I think most people have done this at one point or another, you know, the one where you take white carnations and you put them in different vases filled with water with different colored food coloring. And as the hours pass each carnation begins to take on the color in its petals of the water it had been placed in. They get their life from that water, and it changes what they are. It reminds me of hydrangeas that can change from pink to purple to blue depending on the acidity of the soil they're growing in. The more acidic the soil, the bluer the flowers become.

People are like this, too. We become like what we're rooted in.

And that's what this metaphor is doing. Jesus is reminding his disciples that the kind of fruit they bear, the kind of people they become, will be directly determined by their intimate relationship with him. What is the source they're getting their life from? What is the source we are getting our life from? Because whatever it is, that's what we're going to look like. And if that source is not Jesus, we're in trouble, and you'll be able to tell. Just by looking at our fruit.

Many people, particularly in my generation, feel uncomfortable with statements like this one, statements that suggest that the best or perhaps only way to bear good fruit in the world is to be connected to Jesus. It sounds arrogant or simplistic or exclusive to say that Jesus is the true vine and if you're not connected to him you are missing something.

And I hear that. Fruit grows on all kinds of vines, it's a big vineyard, and the vine grower knows exactly what to do. So I'm not worried about whether or not it is right or possible to find life from some other source. That's God's business.

Our business as people of faith is to do the work that is before us. Our business is to abide. To learn more about who Jesus is. To develop and deepen that relationship. To turn away from other sources that offer us life and see what happens when we find our life in Jesus, see what kind of fruit we bear.

When Jesus is talking to his friends about the vine and the branches, he's not coming off the spiritual high of performing a miracle, he's not surrounded by an adoring crowd, he's not up on top of some mountain, he's sitting at a table, eating supper, his last supper. They sit down to the table for the last time, and the moment of reckoning is near, the moment when it will become clear exactly what might be required of the disciples if they decide to abide in Jesus.

It's not an easy path that we are called to. To abide in Jesus, to become like Jesus, is to say yes to a life of fruit borne out of sacrifice, for no one has greater love than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends.

To abide in Jesus is to model our love after his love.

The gospel is the story of how the power of love like that makes a realized and real difference in the world. The kind of love that changes things is not a platitude, it is not just being polite, and it is not easy. The kind of love that changes things is to give up your life for your friends. To forgive even when everyone in the world thinks you are wrong to offer mercy to someone that terrible. To think about the wellbeing of your neighbors before you think about the next nice thing you'd like to have. To give up your competitive urge to be the greatest. To lift up the voices of people who have been oppressed. To make space in your life for people

who are unpopular. That's the kind of love that bears fruit, good fruit. That kind of love bears fruit like joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

What kind of fruit are you bearing in your life? I ask myself that question every day. What kind of fruit am I bearing in my life? It can feel like a high standard – have I gotten all of my spiritual ducks in a row so that my perfection is evident to all? But the thing about abiding in Jesus is that it's not a one-way street. Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you."

This is what I love best about scripture – every time I get to thinking that I'm somehow required to bring the kingdom of God to earth with my own bare hands, every time I get to thinking that my salvation or my relationship with God or the fruit I bear in the world rests solely within my power, I run into a metaphor like this one and I have to remember that it's not even my vineyard in the first place. I'm a participant in this life of faith, yes, I have a responsibility, an opportunity even, to do my best to be like Jesus and be shaped by the power of his story, but at the end of the day, I'm just a branch, growing on a vine in the middle of God's vineyard. And God is walking through the rows, casting a loving eye on everything that's growing. Grafting here, pruning there, so that each branch will thrive and produce good fruit.

So don't worry. Do your best. Root yourself in the sacrificial love of Jesus. Produce good fruit, to the glory of God. Trust in the vine grower, who knows exactly what to do.

Amen.