



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Abide in Me”

John 15:1-8

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John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

[Jesus said,] “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.”

Sermon:

My brother and I were fortunate. We grew up just a few miles away from our grandparents. While we lived in town, my father’s parents lived out in the country. While we may have a potted tomato plant on our back patio, our grandfather had a greenhouse, a garden, beehives, and chickens. It was a pretty fun place to play and explore. My cousin Jamie and I especially loved our grandfather’s muscadines. In the late summer, that giant vine would be laden with hundreds of



dark, black-purple fruit. Jamie and I would take the vegetable strainer from our grandmother's kitchen and pick all the fruit we could reach.

Though I grew up around it and appreciated the fruits of my grandfather's labors, to say I know much about gardening would be untrue. I do my best to love and nurture green things in our yard, and I do ok—but Chris is the real green thumb in our family. So, I had to spend some time this week learning a bit about grape vines.

Though not common knowledge to me, or perhaps you, the image Jesus uses of the vine, the branches, and fruit was an image his disciples could grasp. This was something his disciples could touch, taste, and see in their own backyards.

The image of the vine was one they would have heard before. In the psalms, they had read about how God took a vine out of Egypt and planted it in a good and Promised Land. The prophet Isaiah sings a song about God's vineyard, and even more prophets speak of God finding Israel like grapes in the wilderness. The images were often used to illustrate what had gone wrong or what had been lost or forgotten by the people Israel, but the common thread in these Old and this New Testament texts is God's abiding presence. Jesus takes this image of Israel and draws it to himself.

In John's gospel, we are eavesdropping into an intimate conversation—but it's a conversation we are pretty sure we were meant to hear. Jesus is preparing his disciples, his closest friends, for his absence. It's a pastoral moment.

Throughout the gospel of John, Jesus has used a number of "I am" statements to help explain who he is and how he is connected to God. "I am the good shepherd." "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." Into this pastoral moment, Jesus offers one last image, "I am the vine." He introduces this idea of extraordinary dependence and reliance on the vine, and he introduces them to a way they can hold onto that promise. It's a deeply relational image, one of mutual dependence.

I don't know about you, but I need something deeply relational after a year like we've had. I find myself clinging more and more to the language of grace and love and abiding presence we find in scripture. Perhaps that's why I was drawn to this particular lectionary passage for today. Jesus is speaking to his disciples' hearts—and through his words, he touches our own.

"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."

If you have ever pruned a shrub or a tree, then you know the process can appear brutal. Sometimes, it can look like the shell of the plant is all that's left behind, but come the next growing season, that green thing can bear beautiful leaves, beautiful fruit.



There's no going back to life before the storm in terms of trauma theory. Things are changed; people are changed. In some ways this year, it may feel as if we've been pruned back to a nub. The good news in this passage is that God is at work because God is the vine-grower. The main idea in pruning is not to cut off dead branches, but to allow more air and more light for the plant beneath.

“Abide in me,” Jesus says. More air, more light.

“Abide” is a passive verb in the Greek. It is not something you can *do*. It is simply what you are from the moment you were baptized. Abiding means remembering you are connected to Jesus. And you are connected to one another.

Lutheran pastor and author Nadia Bolz-Weber says that Christianity is a lousy religion for the “I’ll do it myself” set. We are *meant* to be tangled up together. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another.

This part of Jesus’ imagery can be difficult for us to accept. It implies that our lives are not our own. That our choices affect people we don’t even know. That we are bound to the community of God’s people whether it suits our temperament or not.

“Abide,” might be a passive verb, but it is the key word in Jesus’s metaphor. It appears eight times in these eight verses. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. As Debie Thomas describes it, “abide” is a tricky word. “Passive on the one hand, [yet] active in the other. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It’s a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we’ll get pruned. It’s a risky verb: if we abide, we’ll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It’s a humbling verb: if we abide, we’ll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making. And it’s a relentlessly communal verb—if we abide, ...we will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled, and gorgeous. A life that’s deeply rooted and wildly fertile.”ⁱ

If God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, what should we do? According to John, we have only one task: *to abide*. To tarry, to stay, to cling, to remain, to depend, to rely. To hang in there for the long haul.

Last Saturday, we shared the memorial service for our Pastor Emeritus, Dr. Bill Klein. George, Marianne, and I led the live streamed service for you all to view. Though we were alone in the Sanctuary as we recorded, we felt far from alone in the experience. Once the benediction was declared and the postlude was played, we lingered in this space where Dr. Klein had preached for decades. George shared that he could picture the saints of Second Presbyterian who have gone on before us. He pictured Lynn Avis in his usual pew, Judge Fitzpatrick with his family, Dick Baynton ushering folks to a seat. All at once, we thought of the sanctuary of saints who could have filled this



space five or ten times over in the congregations that warmed these pews before us. Those faithful branches that listened to Dr. Klein, prayed with him, both agreed and disagreed with him, and loved him and one another as disciples along this way.

As you've heard, today is Legacy Sunday. We remember all those branches on this ancient vine. We consider the ways God tended them as God tends us now. Bill Klein was a bulwark for this congregation, yet here we stand without him—here we stand much because of him, because of God's work through him. Here we carry on faithfully because he and other ministers before him have left a legacy.

Alongside the pulpit today we have flowers given in loving memory of Alexa Cannon, beloved child of God and child of this church. They celebrate what would have been her college graduation weekend. A living memorial has been pledged in her name. A generous gift has been given to our Mission Build Campaign that will allow us to name the Alpha Omega House in her memory, renovating that mission space to provide shelter to our neighbors in crisis. While we feel her absence, we will serve in her memory.

“Abide in me,” Jesus says. Rest in me. Hold onto me. Live in me.

These words are pure promise.

I believe that part of what Jesus is trying to tell us is that by being connected to him, we are also able to be connected with each other. Jesus invites us to be real and honest about who we are, and to know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. In Jesus, the vine, we learn that we are loved unconditionally by God.

“Abide in me,” Jesus says, “as I abide in you.” This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise—that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what the future holds, Jesus will hold onto us.

Hear Eugene Peterson's interpretation of our text:

“Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.... I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you're joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant.”
(The Message)

Bearing fruit, abundant harvest, means engaging ourselves as the Body of Christ by spreading God's love to the neighbor whom we are called to love. Perhaps it's the neighbor who needs to feel welcome. Perhaps it's the heart opened by God's Word. Perhaps it's the one seeking shelter—the one who is hungry—the one who is lonely—the one who is grieving. For we all are connected by the abiding grace of God.



Trust in the vine, Second Presbyterian Church. Tended by the vine grower, by it we receive life. By it, we have a future. In it, we have our home.

¹ Debie Thomas, "Abide," www.journeywithjesus.net (April 22, 2018).

