

“Abiding in the Vine”
May 2, 2021

Isaiah 27:2-6
John 15:1-11

Several times in John’s Gospel, Jesus tells his followers just who he is. As we heard last Sunday, he does this with images, with parables. He tells them: “I am the Bread of Life.” He tells them: “I am the Good Shepherd.” As he shares a final meal with his followers, as he prays for them and tells them what life might be like once he has departed from them, Jesus tells them one final time who he is. And this time he also tells his followers—in all ages—who we are as well.

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” Jesus says.

I don’t know much about vines or branches—but I do remember one grape vine.
Every year in the fall it got cut back. That’s about all the tending it received.
Every year in the spring it grew and sent out little tendrils—the branches of the vine—that wrapped themselves around the grape arbor.
The grape leaves appeared.
Then clusters of small green grapes.
Slowly they ripened and turned the dark purple of Concord grapes.

“I am the vine,” Jesus says. “You are the branches.

This is a living relationship:
When you are so distant, so removed from another person that there is no contact—
there is no relationship.
When you are so close to another that there is no separation and your own identity blurs—
there is no relationship.
Jesus speaks of contact instead of cut off.
Jesus speaks of interaction instead of fusion.

The branch is not cut away.

The branch is not absorbed into the vine.

If we are to encounter the risen Christ it will be as individuals, each with our own identity, as we abide—I like that word—as we *abide* with one another.

If we are to “dwell in Christ” it will be as individuals, each one of us bearing her or his own fruit, the unique produce of a relationship with the divine—even as we share that fruit with one another.

This is a living relationship.

Raymond Brown, who probably spent as much time studying the Gospel of John as anybody wrote: "There is only one personal relationship between Jesus and his disciples: if they [abide] in Jesus through faith he [abides] in them through love and faithfulness. There is a *total dependence* of the Christian upon Jesus."

This is a living relationship.

But a dependent one?
That bothers me.

Sometimes it helps to think theologically, because theology can help us see who we are; theology can help us understand what we are.

Human beings belong to the *created* order.
We didn't bring ourselves into being.
We *are* dependent—dependent for our very existence
on God's willing and creating
on human volition and creativity

But we have freedom—or *independence*—created and given by God
to act, to invent, to fulfill God's purposes
to enter into relationships with others that seek justice, love, peace

God does not ask for our servile submission.

But in our freedom we can *choose* to actively continue God's purposes of life and love in the human sphere.

Sin—and I know you hate to hear the word,
and I hate to use it,
but it's still one of the best words we have.

Sin—being cut off from God,
and all the big and little things we do to keep it that way,
being separated from other human beings,
being separated even from the best in ourselves

Sin deprives us of our independence
makes us *dependent* on all kinds of impairments

The paradox is this:

Being cut off—separated from God and others—leads to *a lack of freedom* rather than the freedom that so many people expect to find once they've ditched God at the last corner and set out on their own.

In our separation, Christ makes contact with us
 makes a relationship possible again
 gives the renewed gift of freedom
 strengthens and enables our human capacity to act and create.

In our separation, Christ makes contact with us.
 Perhaps this is one of the lessons, one of the realities of the past year.
 I hope that it has been your experience in some way during these difficult months of separation—that while we have been apart, a new kind of closeness, a new kind of relating has developed.

In the coming months—as we slowly come out of our separation—let us seek to develop new ways of connecting with each other. An outdoor worship service might be possible—not here at the corner of Jefferson and Clinton, of course—but somewhere.

We might meet in small groups outdoors as well—at homes, at parks.

What other options do we have to *reconnect* or strengthen the *new connections* that have developed?

What possibilities do you see?

It may be that our *dependence* upon God
 gives birth to a strong and capable human *independence*.

It's like a vine and its branches. It is a living relationship.

This is a life-giving relationship:
 Branches are tended by the living God.
 Branches are pruned, cut back so that they might flourish and produce.

I imagine you know about that:
 times in which it seemed like the very knife of God had been put to your life
 Again, there have been times in the past year when many have felt “pruned.”

Being pruned must feel an awful lot like being entirely cut away to a branch.

There are various phrases to describe it:
 the dark night of the soul,
 a time in the wilderness,
 carrying a cross.

This is not pointless suffering. It bears fruit.

Maybe your experience whispers to you of resurrection,
 that death gives way to life
 that the God who tends the vine is the one who spoke through Isaiah:
 "I have no wrath
 let them make peace with me,
 let them make peace with me."

Maybe your experience whispers to you of resurrection.
 The last word is life, not death.
 Hope does not disappoint—even if our hopes are disappointed,

Branches are tended by the living God
 and pruned to bear fruit.

This, we need to remember, is God's work, not ours.
 It is not our task to cut others back, cut them down, cut them off.
 It is not our calling to accept the pruning, the cutting of others.

Healthy branches bear fruit
 as a natural outcome of being attached to the vine.

To say Christ is risen is to say something about God
 that God raised Jesus from death;
 that through that death and resurrection God has started something new;
 that God wants us to be a part of that new creation.

But to say Christ is risen is also to say
 that Jesus is not simply a good teacher
 nor an inspiration
 nor a holy figure from ancient times.

He is the resurrection and the life
 the way, the truth and the life
 Christ is the vine in which all branches find health and sustenance
 Christ is the vine from which all branches shoot forth and produce.

Abide in Christ and you will bear much fruit. Let us stay connected and discover all that we might do.