

Sermon for April 29, 2018 – “An Abiding Relationship”

Fifth Sunday of Easter, Year B – Text(s): John 15:1-17

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Today, Jesus is speaking to His disciples using the image of vines and branches. His words come in the many teachings that Jesus leaves with His disciples on the night of the Last Supper. These words are spoken knowing that very shortly Jesus will be arrested, tried, and sentenced to the cross. The disciples have no idea about what is to come. They believed they were simply sharing a Passover meal with the friend and teacher. Yet, Jesus is preparing them; preparing them for what it will mean for Him to die. We know the rest of the story for the disciples. We know that they rarely present themselves very well. They protest when Jesus says one of them will betray Him. Peter rebukes Jesus for talking about dying. They fall asleep in the garden. Peter cuts off the ear of a servant when Jesus is arrested and soon thereafter, denies Jesus three times. They all scatter when Jesus is taken away. The disciples are trying to hold on, trying to hold on to Jesus. Trying to hold on to life. But no matter how hard they protest, or misunderstand, or try to protect, everything will seem to be falling apart around them. And Jesus is trying to prepare them for this reality. We still have the same problem as the disciples. We desperately try to hold on to certain things at all costs; certain parts of ourselves, certain aspects of our lives. And nowhere do we do it better than right here, right in the church.

Many Christians might find it easier to lose a job, be uprooted from their homes or to do just about anything than imagine making major changes in themselves or their church, and then actually making those changes which is what Jesus is talking about in our reading. Jesus is speaking about what it means to be disciple, what it means to truly follow Him. Someone who occasionally needs to be pruned, allow certain parts to die in one way or another at one time or another. It's hard for us to imagine letting go of parts of ourselves of different things that we think are important. The disciples couldn't let Jesus go to the cross. They couldn't wrap their minds around the whole “the Messiah must be crucified, die and rise again in three days.” They couldn't see why this had to happen. We're no different. We try to hold on to things at all costs. We search for ways keep things as they are just a little longer that, personally, we're fine the way we are and don't need to change. And, in terms of things like church, what worked in the past will work now, that change (any change) is (at best) unnecessary or ill-advised and (at worst) will surely mean the end of church as we know it. But Jesus is preparing us for what it means to live AND what it means to die as His disciples, as those prepared to pick up our crosses and follow Him.

The image of the vine and the branches shows us the fullness of the Christian life. Life in, and as, the church. That whole “life, abundant and eternal” thing. As the members of the body of Christ we're in a constant state of dying and rising, of life and death. So, as people of faith, we must learn when to let go. You see, that's what life as people of faith is all about. It's about the practice of letting go, not holding on. We know that generations come and go. We know that people and members come and go. We know that pastors come and go. We even know that congregations come and go. And that's why each and every time we get together we practice letting go. We practice letting go through forgiveness. We ask for and receive. We offer and give. We let go of our guilt and our grief, our anxiety and our fear. We set aside the hurts and grief we carry because of what others have done to us.

We ask to be released from the hurt and pain we've caused others. We practice letting go by giving up of self-righteousness. We come as sinners, seeking forgiveness. We come with hands open, all of us, as Martin Luther said beggars in search of bread. We come tired in search of rest and God bids us lie down in green pastures, beside still waters. God prepares a table for us. And there's not a darn thing we can do to earn this gift. We practice letting go by giving up control. We remind ourselves of things that we've done and things we've left undone. We admit that much of what happens to us, to this church, to our community, is simply beyond us. And the world marches on with, or without us. This is the life of Church. This is where God meets us. As we let go, as we die to ourselves, as we die to our need to control, and even as we simply die, God meets and gathers. God takes hold of us and makes us alive. This is how God works in the world! This is how God turns death into life! Like the grape vine that is left out for winter with branches and rotten grapes still clinging, we hold on to things, all sorts of things, even if they desperately need to go! But Jesus says, "you have already been cleansed, "...you have been pruned...by the word that I have spoken to you." Even while we still hold on God is doing the work of pruning us. God is calling us to let go of all the excess, the rotten fruit, the dead leaves, all the things that keep us from living fully, all the things that keep us from thriving!

I remember my grandfather, growing up our family lived right next door. In his backyard (that actually took up both our backyard and his) he had a garden. He always seemed to be working in that garden. He had all sorts of plants growing there, tomatoes, peppers, lettuce. He also had, believe it or not, a grapevine. The grapes he grew he used to make wine! But, as I say, he was always working in that garden and occasionally he would allow me to help. What I would do is take the trimmings and put them in a pile. I remember asking him once, what he was doing, why he cut off what looked like perfectly good parts of the plant. What do you think he told me? He said he was helping the plants to grow stronger so that the vegetables would grow bigger and better tasting. To this day, I've never seen, or tasted, tomatoes better than my grandfather's and I had my first glass of his wine when I was about eight! This is how God works. No, not giving eight-year-old children glasses of wine, but by trimming in us what needs trimming. God knows what can stay and what needs to go. Still, we fight change. We fight the pruning that's so desperately needed as if our lives and that of the church depended on it. Maybe it's time to trust that God might actually know what He's doing and recognize that it may actually be in our best interest to learn to live in a way that enables us to move past simply **allowing** things to happen to us and in a way where we begin to take an active part in the new thing that God is doing. And I'm talking about the thing that God is doing within us, the church and in the world around us. Here's where the whole "abiding in Christ" thing comes in. We hear the word "abide" quite a bit in the gospels, but what exactly does abiding mean? And while we're at it, what's the whole vine thing about? And what's Jesus talking about when He says we're to bear fruit?

Let's start with a little context here. Beginning in John 13, at the Last Supper (John's version of it) Jesus gives a farewell address to His disciples that continues until chapter 17, where He prays for them. He knows that He will soon be betrayed and denied, arrested and crucified, dead and buried. And yet, He graciously takes the time to prepare His disciples, reminding them what it means to bear fruit and that to do so they can only do so by abiding in Him. Jesus describes Himself as the true vine and His Father as the vinedresser. This was a way to contrast Jesus with Old Testament Israel.

The hearers would understand that He was saying that He was *the* Messiah and the fulfillment of the covenant because of the Old Testament references to a vineyard, particularly those in Isaiah. Jesus explains that the branches that don't bear fruit are cut off but the branches that bear fruit are pruned to bear more fruit. If even if you know nothing about plants you know that you have to prune them in order to help them grow better. And, to bear fruit here means to grow in character, but not just that. Bearing fruit means growing in character in a way that's apparent. Apparent meaning in a way that people can **see**. Apparent in the way we walk, talk, by the way we carry ourselves and, most of all, by the way we act, the things we do, the things that we do to reflect Christ to the world. And this is where we come to His command to abide because, as Jesus tells His disciples, "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine. Neither can you, unless you abide in Me". There are several possible translations for the original Greek word. They include "remain," "stay," and "wait." All of these come in to play here and three things are implied.

1. Mutual **connection**.
2. **Dependence**.
3. **Continuance**.

These aren't so much steps, as they are interwoven aspects of abiding. Put another way, to abide in Christ means to be united to Jesus, to rely on Jesus, and to remain in Jesus. It starts when we take seriously His commandments. First, to love God with all our hearts, minds, souls and strength and second, to love one another as He loves us.

What this all points to is this, and here brothers and sisters, is the thing. Abiding is about **relationship**. We abide, we remain, we wait in a **relationship**. And here's the good news. We love, because He first loved us. We didn't choose Him, He chose us! He chose us to walk **with** Him and live out our faith **in** Him in a way that reflects His love for us and for the world, a world for which He willingly died! Apart from Christ we can do absolutely nothing.

This is also good news to anyone who thinks they need to muster up strength to pursue and know Christ, because they don't! He provides the grace and strength that's needed. The fruit that Jesus speaks of is simply evidence of an abiding relationship with Him, one that **He** initiated and where **He** does all the heavy lifting. A relationship that reminds us that there's no greater love than dying for one's friends. He says, "You are my friends if you do what I command you." Think about that for a moment. Jesus tells us that we're His friends if we obey His command to love and that command is fulfilled through abiding. As we abide in Him we will bear fruit, good fruit, fruit that will last. An outward sign of the new life we have in Jesus. Abide in Him, and He will abide in you. He who began a good work in you will complete it. He who called you is faithful. He will surely do it.

He is risen indeed.

Thanks be to God.

Amen and amen.