

Isaiah 5:1-7
John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter
Midway Presbyterian Church
May 2, 2021

The Vine and the Branches

Introduction to the Old Testament Lesson

In our Old Testament reading today we hear a lesson from The Parable of the Vineyard. As God's chosen people, Israel was to bear fruit, carry out God's work, and uphold justice. But the fruit turned bad. Listen to these words from Isaiah 5:1-7...

Introduction to the Gospel Lesson

In our Gospel Lesson for this Fifth Sunday of Easter Jesus gives instruction about the vital relationship between the vine and the branches. Jesus is the true vine and followers of Christ are the branches. Therein lie implications of great significance for both the individual and the church. If we abide in him, we will bear much fruit. Listen to these words from John 15:1-8...

Sermon

Former Columbia Seminary professor Charles Cousar says that the two prior chapters of John's Gospel, chapters 13 and 14, set the scene for a farewell conversation between Jesus and the disciples. He is going where they cannot go, at least for now, and thus his words provide urgent instruction for what is vital when the Lord is no longer physically with them.

In the last verses of chapter 14 Jesus says:

I will no longer talk much with you, for the ruler of this world is coming. He has no power over me; but I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way. (14:30-31)

“Rise, let us be on our way.” It’s clearly time to get moving. Jesus’ instructions are not meant for a community at rest, to carry on business as usual. They are meant for a community needing to deal with change, ready to reach out in witness and service.

Now we know that in the Old Testament there are many texts where Israel is referred to as God’s special vine, including many of Israel failing to fulfill its calling, as in our Old Testament Lesson today from Isaiah. Well, the vine imagery is repeated here in John 15 to a new Israel that now includes Gentiles.

And the words are not just addressed to individual Christians, but also to the church, whose communal life and ministries of outreach and service are no more than branches to be tossed into the fire, apart from the indwelling Christ. For sometimes the church places more emphasis on committee structure, staff alignment, member questionnaires, and demographic trends, than it does on *abiding in Christ*, and thereby bearing much fruit.

In his Letter to the Church in Galatia, Paul declares that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” (5:23-23a) It is not enough to just be a member of the church, formally connected to Christ, as part of his body. To bear the fruit of the Spirit we need to abide in Christ. And Christ in us.

Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit,
because apart from me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5b)

An everyday example of connection can be seen in Debra Dodson, a former Teacher of the Year. It is no secret that the teaching profession has many challenges and frustrations. When asked how she managed, Debra replied, “The formula was very simple: I love all my students.” She went on to explain how the children have changed over the years and how they needed love; they needed love by words, with eye contact, with spirit, and even with touch. Dodson went on

to say, “I have come to realize that our classroom may be the only place left where many of them can feel safe, acknowledged, validated and authentically cared for.”

It is important to understand how God can enable us to bear fruit, even in these times when life has become difficult. Like the nurse who made it her goal not to let the increased paperwork and the understaffing get to her. Instead, she would go around and spread her joy and sunshine. The results were that colleagues were encouraged and patients were uplifted. Even a grumpy doctor who barked at everybody was moved. One day when he barked at her, she touched his arm and said, “I know you must be having a very difficult day. If there is any way I can make your job easier, please ask me.” He said nothing, but she reported that he stopped using scolding tones with the staff where she worked.

Part of what “abiding in Christ” means for us is that we let Jesus’ words abide in us, we meditate on them, and we seek to obey them. The Presbyterian Church is a connectional church. We’re connected with other churches through Presbytery, Synod, and General Assembly. Being connected enables us to learn from one another. It enables us to do things together that we could not do on our own. Like providing charitable care for residents of Presbyterian Communities of South Carolina, or providing children at Thornwell Home in Clinton a healing home, or providing a missionary presence on the Arizona/Mexico Border. But it’s even more important that we’re connected with the vine. For cut off from the vine, branches will wither and die. Prayer, Bible Study, Worship, and faithful service are vital nutrients in bearing fruit. In celebrating the Sacrament of Holy Communion, we feel perhaps the deepest connection with our Lord and Savior.

On Easter Sunday we sang, “Abide with Me.” When the Scottish Anglican, Henry Francis Lyte, wrote it in 1847, he lay dying from tuberculosis, and survived only three weeks

after its completion. The hymn is based on the request of the two disciples on the road to Emmaus, where they sought to detain the unrecognized, resurrected Lord who had joined them. “Abide with us, for it is toward evening, and the day is far spent.” Thus Jesus entered their home, where they recognized him as he broke bread before them. (Lk. 24:13-35)

In his book, *Life on the Vine*, Philip Kenneson says that,

worship—rightly understood and practiced—shapes and reorients our desires. In gathering together in the presence of the God who created us, we listen again to the grand story of “God with us,” a story that both frees us from the necessity of spinning our own stories with ourselves at the center, and frees us to locate our lives afresh within God’s story. In so gathering we do our best to quiet the voices of our own agendas, our own desires, our own strivings—in order to hear afresh what God desires.

Abide is a word that John employs to describe a relationship of trust, love, and knowledge. That relationship can exist now in the present, and it is a relationship that can continue forever. For faith, hope, and love *abide*. And the greatest of these is love.

Anglican Priest Robert Brown spoke of an experience he had in the vineyards of Cyprus. It was winter and he was struck by how shabby and bare the vines appeared, because they had been pruned for the next growing season. Those branches looked totally unable to produce leaves and bear grapes. I imagine most of us can recall a time in our lives when we felt dry and barren, when we wondered if life would ever flow in and through us again. Nonetheless, people familiar with agriculture know how pruning and eliminating dead branches are part of healthy grape growing.

As a Master Gardener, Jesus declares that every branch that bears no fruit will be taken away; and every branch that bears fruit, God prunes, that it may bear more fruit. Fred Craddock says, “Pruning can be so painful (removal of the debilitating baggage of things, relationships, activities, meaningless pursuits.)” Churches that move through hardship to increased devotion to

mission, have been pruned. Those that pull back in fear and resentment with attention only to their own comfort and desires may well be taken away.

Pastor Richard Stetler tells of a young person in his congregation who was quite talented in many ways. She was Jewish, yet while she was in middle and senior high school, she attended the youth group of the United Methodist Church where he was pastor. She went on to New York City and became a very successful professional in the advertising industry. Stetler reported that one day she called him and described how empty she felt even though she had everything material that she could want. After their talk, she wisely decided to leave that profession and move to another location where she has written two books. The sense of emptiness and loss was the painful pruning process that needed to take place for this talented woman to bear fruit.

Two weeks ago we focused on being children of God. Last week on sheep having a good shepherd. The imagery this week is that we are declared branches of the vine and that the Divine Gardener is at work in us to make us more productive, sometimes by pruning. The call is for us to abide in Christ, as he abides in us. It may be that we're so busy *doing*, we don't take the time for *being*. In Isaiah we read:

For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel:
 In returning and rest you shall be saved;
 in quietness and in trust shall be your strength.
 But you refused. (30:15)

My friends, the path that we follow is one that the Good Shepherd guides us on. It is a path of righteous. It leads to still waters and green pastures. It is a path of listening and obeying, of hearing and following. The pioneer and perfecter of our faith walked this path, as the faithful Son, led by the Heavenly Father. It is a fruitful path that keeps us near to the heart of God.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.