

Church of the Crossroads  
Fifth Sunday of Easter  
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## ABIDING IN CHRIST

John 15:1-8

“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.”  
- John 15:5

Undoubtedly, this is a beautiful metaphor, this metaphor of the vine and the branches. It speaks of the relationship between Jesus and his followers. He is the main stem of the vine. Each one of us is a branch, a leaf, an offshoot that is sustained and nourished by the nutrients that run through the stem that comprises the essential part of the vine.

Jesus is the vine, the main stem, each one of us is a branch. It is a beautiful metaphor. At the same time, it is a metaphor that can easily descend into a kind of sentimentality. Jesus is the vine; I am a branch. How wonderful! Keeping this in mind, it might be possible, I suppose, to go through life naively, innocently, unconcerned about the harsh realities of life. After all, I abide in Christ. Is that not enough for me? It says that if I ask for whatever I wish, then it will be done for me. Who could ask for more?

A second look at the metaphor is required. For, as it is presented in the Gospel of John, there are certain factors that enter into its fullest expression. This morning, I would like to mention three.

First, it is important, indeed very important to realize that these words are not addressed to me as an individual. They are addressed to a community. The “you” in this passage is always plural. It is not just me abiding in Christ. It is all of us together, the brothers and sisters, abiding in him. This saves the metaphor from the sin, dare I use the word, the sin of individualism. The metaphor of the vine and the branches is distinctly communal in nature. And may I add that it is a communal metaphor that speaks of a remarkable equality. In Christ, there is no room for inequality.

There is no room for first class Christians and second class Christians. There is no room for hierarchy. There is no room for restrictions on who can or cannot be baptized, on who can or who cannot be ordained. There are no branches, no leaves that are more important than other branches, other leaves. Now, given the bias towards hierarchy to be found in much of the Bible, both the older and newer testaments, this truly is remarkable.

The communal nature of the metaphor is also striking when it comes to prayer. When the text says, “ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you,” the “you” continues to be a plural “you.” These words have nothing to do with individual wants, wishes, or desires. Prayer must arise out of the life of the community. The members of the community must agree as to what is needed from the hands of God. Here, again, this is a remarkable corrective to popular notions of prayer that are individualistic in nature, prayer that satisfies our own needs and desires without regard to the needs of the community. It is one thing that I as an individual should pray for something for myself. But the question is whether or not that request of mine is something the whole community would pray for on my behalf.

The first point, then, is that the metaphor of the vine and the branches is communal in nature. The second thing to note in the way this metaphor is presented is the theme of judgment that belongs to it. Note the theme of judgment. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are thrown into the fire, and burned.” Which goes to say that there is a discipline that is involved in abiding in Christ. Again, the discipline has to do with the communal nature of the metaphor. In the spirit of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, it means that we are to be “of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind.” It means doing “nothing from selfish ambition or conceit,” but in humility regarding others as better than ourselves. It means not looking to our own interests, but to the interests of others. It means being in the same mind that was in Christ Jesus. (Philippians 2:2-5) That kind of discipline is necessary if we are to abide in Christ. It has a counter-cultural ring to it, to be sure. And if we cannot follow the discipline, it will be as if we are separated from the vine. It is as if we are no longer part of the community that abides in Christ. It is as if we wither and die.

So, my friends, there is a discipline that is involved in abiding in Christ. That is the second point we can make. And, in the third place, there is a factor that belongs to the metaphor that is perhaps the most difficult

factor of all. And that is the fact that if we want to abide in the vine that is Christ, we are going to have to expect some pruning. Excuse me, pruning? Yet, there it is, right there in the text. “I am the true vine, and God my Father/Mother is the vinegrower. God removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” That’s us, my brothers and sisters. We belong to the vine; but this does not mean that we are not going to undergo the knife.

Those of us who are older know what this means, although it happens that those who are younger can also know what this means. There are those events, those crises, whether we be younger or older, that serve as a kind of pruning. A health crisis, a mental illness, a death, a divorce, a deep disappointment, a traumatic experience, an estrangement, a time when we were treated unjustly, a time when we were abused – all these comprise the pruning that comes with living. Now, as I look back on the times of pruning in my life, I cannot say that I was at the time grateful for them. In truth, I did not want to even face them. They brought me low, to the point of despair. But perhaps even worse was the aftermath, the residual effects of the crisis.

After a while, perhaps, the suffering that presented itself as disruptive and threatening in our lives became somehow integrated into our living, thanks be to God. And we somehow found ourselves stronger for it. We may even have learned from it. We woke up one day and discovered ourselves to be just a little more compassionate and understanding and wise than we had been prior to the crisis. I think that is what the text means when it says that every branch that bears fruit is pruned by God to make it bear more fruit.

In his comments on this passage, (*Christian Century*, 1994), Walter Wink refers to the writer and spiritual director Elaine Emeth. By the way, Emeth died at the age of 57 just two months ago. Elaine Emeth once said that the pruning metaphor worked for her only if she thought of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through a prized garden. Afterward, the gardener tenderly prunes the injured plants in order to guarantee survival and to restore beauty and harmony. Pruning, she said, is not to be confused with the tragedies that overtake us; it has more to do with clearing away the debris left behind.

Once the debris is cleared away, then we do experience a restoration of beauty and harmony, thanks to a loving God.

And so it is, my friends, that this metaphor of the vine and the branches is profound beyond our imagining. It is a metaphor that speaks not to individuals, but to the community of Christ's followers. It speaks of the necessary discipline that comes when we belong to the community that abides in Christ. And it speaks, perhaps best of all, of Christ's abiding presence in our lives, not only when life treats us well, but also when we must travel through the chance and change of life.

When everything has been said, abiding in Christ is not something we do easily. It is not something we can take for granted. Nor is it something that we can choose to do naively or thoughtlessly. Yet, it is the very thing that gives us life as a faith community. It is the very thing that nourishes and sustains us in all life's circumstances. Christ is the vine; we are the branches. Thanks be to God.