

A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

Abiding in the Vine

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

Today's Gospel reading takes place during the Last Supper, a scene which begins two chapters earlier in John 13. By this time, Jesus knows His death is close at hand. His hour has come. It is the last time he is with his disciples before the raging storm, the fiery furnace of his arrest and crucifixion. In John's Gospel from chapter 13-17, we listen in on Jesus talking with his disciples around that Table on the night when he would be betrayed. Here he impresses on them an image that will endure in their memories and continue to shape the lives of communities of Christians for all time. "I am the vine; you are the branches." This is a great Mystery. Even when he will no longer be physically present with them, they will still be able to remain united with him in a new way.

This had great meaning for them, and it does for us. The church is not to be a memorial society for a dead Jesus. Stories are important; storytelling is critical, and old stories are the best. Let us tell the stories of the old times, of Jesus and the disciples, and all they did to demonstrate a new way of being in the world.

Let us tell all the stories, of the old prophets who stood against the powers and against the worst of human nature and thundered, "God's ways are not your ways. Your ways are definitely not God's ways. And God will bring the world to rights especially for the poor, the widows, the children, the strangers in your land." Let us tell the stories of those whose faith withstood temptation and persecution: Daniel in the lion's den, David facing Goliath, Moses crying out for mercy on his wayward people. Let us tell the old stories. The old stories are important, and we gather to remember and retell them over and over. But that's not all there is, what happened a long time ago. Not nearly all there is.

Our gatherings are not merely for storytelling of his great adventures or just for examining the moral implications of his teachings. Yes, let us learn the moral implications of the teachings of Jesus and the law of God. Let us remember the commandments and their meanings; let us recall Jesus's high calling on our lives that we may be faithful; let us recount the Apostle's teachings about our bodies, our relationships, our money, our food, our obedience to God. Let us obey. Let us confess and repent when we do not. The old teachings are important, and we gather to teach and learn and encourage one another toward faithfulness. But that's not all there is. Not nearly all there is.

Christian life is not just remembering the old stories and being thankful for them.
Christian life is not just honoring Christ's teachings and trying to fulfill them.
Christian life is participating in the life of the risen Christ through the Holy Spirit.

The great mystery of our faith is that even when he is no longer physically present to us, we are still able to remain united to Him. The word he uses here is abide. *Abide in me*. Stay in me. Remain in me. It's a relationship word of dependence and interdependence. It means that Christ is present here and now, as we gather and within us. Christ is with you. Would you say that with me now as a prayer and as a witness to one another. *Christ is with you*.

As you breathe in and breathe out, *Christ is with you*.
 As your mind quickens and as it wanders, *Christ is with you*.
 As your heart swells and when it breaks, *Christ is with you*.
 As your faith rises and when it wobbles, *Christ is with you*.

This is a great gift to remind one another of the mystery of abiding, enduring, grace-filled presence with us here. To express the reality, this new way of being united to him, Jesus uses the image of the grapevine, its branches, and the fruit of the vine--grapes used to make wine, like the wine he just served them at Table and over which he said "This is my blood." Like blood in a body flows from its beating heart to its arms and legs, the life force of a vine flows as sap to the branches, to its fruit.

We are to abide in Christ, like a branch bearing fruit draws its life from the vine. Like a vine and its branches, we are united with Christ. The allegory is so lovely because it's a living image. We might be tempted nowadays and might find it even more relevant to draw the same comparison by saying we are plugs being plugged into the wall socket to gain our electricity from God to light up the lamp. That's fine, but the first century didn't know anything about that. I think the imagery of the vine and the branches is even more lovely because it's living and it's vulnerable. It is a living image. Peter may be the rock, but in this image, the church is not a rock. The church is a living, growing, fruit-bearing green thing, rooted in good soil by the vine.

This sap rising, this life force flowing, this blood pumping is the very love of God. We are rooted by the vine in the love of God. Again, not just in the *memory* of the love of God way back then or the *teaching* of the love of God, but in the *mystery* of the love of God all around and within us. God's love flows in and through us giving us life and bringing forth fruit.

This is the first lovely, living word Christ impresses upon us. We can be united with Christ here and now though he is not physically present. Let's remember what we teach our children: just talk to him. Isn't that what we teach our children to say when we teach them about prayer? Just talk to him? Say a prayer and trust that he is with you. A prayer doesn't have to be longwinded or carefully constructed. A prayer can just be: *Christ is with me now*. It can just be: *Lord Jesus Christ, son of God, have mercy on me a sinner*. It can just be one word: *help*. It can just be a word of faith: *I trust you*.

This morning as you rise from your seat to come to Table, I want to ask you to have one word or short prayer you repeat as you come. We will each ask the Spirit to give us a word or a phrase that we pray—just for you. What word do you need? It can be a name of someone you're

praying for, or a word like: *trust*, *abide*, or *love*, or just *thank you*. Eucharist means thanksgiving. Or if you're truly brave, and if this is the word the Spirit gives you, your word may be: *broken*.

Let your heart contemplate the breaking at the table: the breaking of bread necessary to feed the congregation and the crushing of the wheat that happened long before; the crushing of the grapes needed to make the wine. When we come to the Table, we, of course, remember Christ's sacrificial death and celebrate his resurrection. We also are renewed in the grace of God, remaking us as those who are broken and made whole, sinners forgiven, people restored. We receive the broken Body of Christ and by it God mysteriously works to remake the fragmented pieces of our broken lives in the unity of his love. This is an ongoing work in us. Thanks be to God for every time that work is happening.

This is an ongoing, living spiritual reality. Jesus wants us to understand the importance of remaining united to him. The branches are not self-sufficient but depend totally on the vine which is the source of their lives. This passage, John 15, is run through with warnings about what happens to branches. Some are pruned. Some are cut off. No one escapes the garden shears. Somehow or another, there's always going to be pain, and clearly, those disciples would soon face more than they thought they could bear. Whatever comes, abide in me. Jesus understood something that night around that table they could not possibly understand and so those words are dripping with prophetic power. He knew what would happen in those next hours and impresses upon them to listen to words that they would remember: *whatever happens, abide in me. I am still with you.*

He shows us how to do this. He left his own example. Every day he retreated to pray. We need the restorative life of prayer; we need God's living word in the Scripture; we need the loving, and sometimes sharpening, words of our brothers and sisters; we need others who remind us to keep our hands open to give for the one to whom you give is always Christ, who is with you.

What I have found in my own life and seen in the lives of others over and over again: when we feel like God is not there; like our faith is withered and dead; like there's no life, no joy in our faith; almost always, almost every time, we have severed our spiritual vitality from the vine, the source of our lives. This is even true, maybe even especially true, for people whose lives are called upon to generate tremendous fruit. The task of producing fruit, day after day, for children and friends and coworkers and communities and projects and initiatives and goodwill and good things will run you dry. Classrooms for teachers will run you dry.

People say "I'm burned out" but what they really mean is "I'm withered up." We have so many metaphors for this, it must be a pretty common experience. My well is dry, my cupboard is empty, I'm running on fumes. What happens very often is we turn our eyes and hearts to the fruit we're trying to produce--the good work, the important program, the accomplishment—and let's be honest, we get praise for the fruit not the root. But what happens is we think the Christian life is about producing more and more fruit. It's not. It is about abiding in the root and trusting the fruit will come after the flowers.

When the fruit dries up, it's usually because the branch has fallen away from the vine. Jesus said at that moment in all of their lives, whatever happens, "Abide in me. Apart from me you can do nothing." If you cut off a branch, the leaves stay green for a little while, but it's not life, only an illusion of life. Abide in me and live.

To abide is to participate in the life of God, for the love and life of God to flow in and through you such that you become an extension of God's life. This is what Jesus invites us to by repentance and reconciliation. Jesus knows full well that none of us on our own always stay abiding in the vine on our own strength. We all fail; we all falter; we all splinter. We all do. But the path to abiding is the path through confession and repentance and return every time, every day, every week, we come back. And maybe that prayer is simply "help."

Do not be startled at Jesus extraordinary claim, "If you abide in me and my words in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." This sounds baffling because we know full well we don't always get what we ask for from parents or from God, and we have a hunch that's not what prayer is for anyway. But this isn't about getting what you wish; it's having your wishes, your will, your heart and life so fully an extension and expression of God's life that like a branch on a vine, you are almost indistinguishable from the vine. Where does the vine end and the branch begin?

Would this to be true of God's Church today. Where does God's life end and the Church's life begin? This certainly is our prayer. That we together so breathe in and breathe out God's trinitarian life that our lives pulse with the Spirit, and our cups overflow with the sweetness of God's life-giving love.

May we bear fruit.

May you abide in Christ, the source of your life and love.

And may you abide in His presence with you, within you this day, even this very day in this very place.

May you be renewed in the joy of the living God.