

A Sermon for DaySpring

By Eric Howell

Abiding in the Vine

John 15.1-8

April 29, 2024

We're coming down to the last couple of weeks of the Giving Back, Building Forward campaign to come together and make individual commitments toward the shared purpose to reconfigure and expand our facilities. When we started all of this, I kind of dreaded it. I think most pastors do actually if we're being honest. "Oh, we're going to talk about money," and people can get prickly about that in church. "Oh, we're talking about building buildings," and that's always fraught with tensions practical, theological, and missional. "Oh, what if we don't make it, and we fall short of the goal?" Those are some of the pointy-eared hamsters that turned my mental wheel of anxiety when we started.

And not to say they aren't legitimate concerns, worthy of consideration, but I will say, this whole journey, it's been really rich. The leadership that has stepped forward from within the congregation has been so strong and so positive. The testimonies we've heard together in worship, and I've gotten to overhear from folks sharing . . . it's just been really beautiful. And I'm just so very grateful.

One of the early steps in the process was to create a simple logo that could be used throughout the campaign in communication. Again, another one of those things I sort of dreaded doing. And then some of our super-talented people put their hearts and heads together and designed the image of our church with a vine growing from within it, as if the vine is at the heart of the church. It's simple, and it's lovely. It's very well done. And, it connects with our gospel reading for today.

Today's Gospel shows us Jesus at the Last supper. He knows his death is close at hand. It is the last time he is with his disciples and so what he wants to say carries extra weight for them, for John the gospel writer, and for us. Jesus wants to impress firmly a fundamental truth in his disciples: even when he will no longer be physically present with them, they will be able to remain united to him in a new way and carry on the mission they have shared to this point. If, however, they lose unity with him, they become sterile, even harmful to those around them. To express this reality, this way of being united with him, Jesus uses the image of the vine and the branches.

This is the 7th of seven "I Am" statements in the gospel. I am the Bread of Life, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Light of the world... But this is the only one of the seven that also includes a "you" statement: "I am the true vine. You are the branches." Jesus is the vine, and through him, the very love of God is passed to the branches. We are the branches, and Jesus wants us to understand the importance of remaining in vital communion with him. Faith is not a performative act done from our own strength or our own will. We don't, or rather we should say simply can't, muster the strength to live as if we are Christians when

we do so disconnected from the source of our life. We are able to be united with Christ and share in his redemption, but if we lose unity with him, we become sterile and even harmful to others, even when we're busy doing all the good things. In another "I am" statement, Jesus said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life." We only walk the Jesus way and live the Jesus truth when we share the Jesus life.

When we remain in Christ through prayer and attention to the growth of our faith, we enjoy and produce the fruit of the Holy Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. The fruit of union with Christ is profound. Our whole person is transformed by the grace of Christ. We should say our whole person is being transformed because it's not a one-time thing--we don't suddenly become a fully flowering vine. There's growth in seasons, and sometimes there's pruning that needs to happen.

Pruning is one of the themes running through the passage here; sometimes reader's eyes lock in first on that part. They lock in on the parts about branches being cut off, tossed aside, and burned up. Maybe their eyes go to it so quickly because their ears have had a fill of it from red faced preachers who pointed to this passage as they warned them of the wrath to come on them if they do not receive Jesus or stay faithful to him. Truth is, Jesus does speak to what happens when we're off on our own—we don't produce fruit, we wither, we die. The disciples themselves would experience what that feels like just within a day of this message, which is probably why it was so important to remember. Just a day later, they would not remain with Jesus in his time of agony. They would flee, and they would never forget what that felt like. They saved their lives, but for a while it was as if they lost them.

That's the whole point of the image. For the branches, the vine is the source of life and strength. There is nothing more important than abiding in the true vine: clinging to it, drinking deeply from it, holding on no matter what. The vine, Christ, is the one and only source of life. Everything else flows from that relationship. Have you ever come to a point where you said, "My spiritual tank is empty"? I think it's the same experience; it's just we identify more these days with the picture of a car running out of gas and being stranded on the side of a road, than we do the life of vines and branches and soil. Which is a loss because vines and branches are a picture of actual life, and because the vine Jesus speaks of is a grapevine which grows grapes, which make wine which Jesus has just shared in a profound way with these same disciples. It's a picture of the church's life shared in the Eucharist, at the table of the Lord.

That, too, has everything to do with the spirit of this spring's campaign and all that happens from here forward. When our consultant—who, by the way, has been a tremendous help--when he asked early on, "What's the goal?" And we said, "To reconfigure and expand our buildings." He said, "No, that's not the goal." Well, ok, this is one of those leadership things where you have to give the deeper answer... "The goal is to be more hospitable, to provide space and safety for children, to give youth a place to meet, and have a long-awaited larger place to gather for meals." He said, "No, that's not the goal."

Alright---what he really wants us to do is to get real practical. We said, “Okay, the goal is to raise the \$2.4 million it will take to build what we’re talking about, or at least raise \$1 million so we can afford the cost it will take to finance the remainder.” “No,” he said, “that’s not the goal.” That got annoying: “Hold on, you work for us. How do you know what the goal is? Mr. Financial Campaign Consultant, you tell us what the goal is.”

He said, “The goal is to be a happy, healthy church once you’ve done all those things.” He was right of course. Just as in everything, it’s about being connected with the source of our being. Ends never justify the means, and the process is just as important as the outcome. And at the end of the day, a church isn’t about buildings, though they can be hugely important. It’s not about fund raising, though it takes funds to do anything like this. And frankly, as a spiritual practice, learning to give generously is just as important as what’s being given to. He was reminding us that there’s two ways to go about something like this, as I suppose there is in life—get hyper focused and anxious about the outcome and destroy everything in its path including yourself or stay rooted in the source of your life and being and let whatever comes flow from there like sap rising through the branches of the tree of life.

In our icon, the vine within the picture of the building reminds us that while a building can be like a living thing and can be a place where life together and life in Christ flourishes, a vine is a living organism. And there’s never just one branch. Branches are all intertwined in a web of life. The branches of a vine-- like a grapevine if you’re in the middle east, or kudzu if you’re in the south—they all intertwine. You can’t easily pull them apart—I think that’s the point. They are united as one, some bearing more fruit, some less, but each one instrumental to the life of the whole. That’s each of us.

1 John speaks of all of this as abiding and speaks of all of this as abiding as love. Let us love one another because love is from God. And then that most remarkable of sayings: God is love. God is love in just the way that God’s Son was sent that we may live in him and his love flow through us. In this, we abide. In this, God abides in us, and his love is—we pray by grace--perfected in us. By this, we know we abide in him and he in us.

The vine image is so beautifully spiritually rich because it speaks to the essence of our very being. We have one priority before anything else, a priority that flows into everything else: to abide in Christ. May his life, his resurrected life, flow in and through us in these days, in our homes and families, in our work and vocations, in our service and mission, in our giving and receiving. In all things, may our lives bear good fruit, may the harvest be plentiful, and may our cup overflow.

Amen.