

Easter 5B
John 15:1-8

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The Vine and the Vine Grower

It is mighty tempting in the spring to stretch the metaphor of the vine and the vine grower about as far as one can go. I would probably not be wide of the mark if I supposed that many, if not most, of you spent some time this weekend cutting grass, pulling weeds and pruning shrubs. We have growth and greening on the brain.

Among my neighbors, I have been considered something of a barbarian in my flower planting style. I am not much of a gardener so if someone with more experience tells me how something ought to be done, I tend to listen and obey. So when I plant my flowers, I have been known to go through and pull every blossom off every plant, leaving very bland mounds of green beside our front walk. But I was taught that by removing the blossoms, the young plant can divert more energy to establishing a sturdy root system. When we plant tomatoes, for weeks I will systematically pluck off every yellow bud. Again, I was taught that it would divert energy to creating a healthier plant that would in turn produce even more abundant tomatoes. Then just when things are getting lush and ripe with color, nigh on about the 4th of July, I head out to the garden and flower pots with my pruner and, to the horror of my neighbors, cut all the annuals back by half. It is a pretty grisly sight, branches of petunias, begonias and geraniums lying in a dying heap on the sidewalk, the glorious color rapidly wilting. And the pots and flowerbeds look shocked, a bit like in the aftermath of a horrible storm. But I heard from someone who should know that if you cut the annuals back on the 4th, the plants will get fuller, the blossoms more plentiful and you will avoid the leggy thinness that comes on in late summer flowers.

I am sure that I will be inundated this weekend with advice from much wiser gardeners than my early mentors. But the pruning and the cutting back is done with the intention of increasing the overall production and health of the plant. Kind of a living metaphor of the vine that John is talking about.

I don't very much like to think about being pruned. I have been pruned though. As have many of you I am sure. As we reflect back over our lives we can identify things that might in hindsight look like the vinegrower taking a pair of loppers after us. And we might, if we are lucky, be able to see how that pruning has made us more productive of better, more worthwhile fruit. But then images of judgment and being cut from the vine and thrown on the fire come to mind and the pruning metaphor becomes more uncomfortable. We start to wonder about God and punishment and cause and effect and divine wrath.

But if we focus too much on pruning maybe we miss the point of this Gospel message, a point that John picks up again in his first letter. The point is abiding. In the Gospel Jesus says: "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." In his first letter John writes: "God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God." Did you notice that in both the Gospel and the letter, the abiding is a mutual act? "Abide in me, as I abide in you." "God abides in those who confess Jesus and they abide in God." What does it mean to abide in God? And what

does it mean for God to abide in us?

The Greek word used by John and translated here as *abide* is “meno.” It means “to remain” and it is a favorite of John’s to point to an inward, enduring personal communion. I also like the Hebrew word for abide, yaw-shab, which likewise means “to remain” or but also means “to have one’s dwelling.”

It’s not really great biblical scholarship to import the meaning of the Hebrew into the Greek but translating ancient languages into English doesn’t always bring with it the richness of meaning that these words originally carried. So for today I am going to work with them together in order to get at the fullest definition of abide.

Jesus commands: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Remain with me, have your dwelling in me. Dwelling implies a sense of permanence, of residence, of where our life is centered. How do we abide in Jesus? The Vietnamese Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh teaches the discipline of sitting quietly, even for a few minutes and breathing in and breathing out and for Christians, practicing the presence of Jesus sitting beside you. Practice being the beloved disciple leaning on Jesus knee and just abiding in his love. What an extraordinary thing for us to learn from a Buddhist who lives halfway around the world. We abide in Jesus by making him the source and center of our lives. WE can do this in silence and we can do this in worship. I wonder how it might transform your worship life if you were to think of it as coming to abide in Jesus.

And then Jesus promises us that if we abide in him, we will be branches that bear fruit. Jesus does not say, bear fruit and then you will abide in me. No, it is by abiding in Jesus that we are able to bear fruit...all fruitfulness comes from the source and center of our lives.

But then how does Jesus abide in us? Do we abide somehow equivalently in each other? Imagine for a moment Jesus dwelling in you, remaining in you, breathing in and out and abiding in your love? I struggle to make it work out the same way. It rather takes my breath away to think that there might be something mutual about abiding. But mutual doesn’t necessarily mean equivalent. It can be helpful turn to John’s use of the word abide to describe an enduring, personal communion, sharing, an intimate fellowship, where each is giving and each receiving. Even that is a lot to imagine, to think that we have anything we can give to Jesus!

Someone asked recently if Jesus is in heaven or if Jesus is still on earth. Imagine, Jesus dwelling in you. Jesus alive in you. Jesus alive on earth by making the people of God his dwelling place. Perhaps that’s what it means for Jesus to abide in us.

If we look two verses further into the Gospel, Jesus says, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love.” Just prior to this Jesus has given his commandment that we are to love one another as he has loved us. All the commandments wrapped into this one: love one another.

You might ask how we can be commanded to “love.” We cannot be commanded to love if loving is simply a feeling, something that we “fall into.” But love the way Jesus is talking about it is an act of the will. Love is a choice. Love is an action verb. In marriage each day you must choose again to love your spouse. Children, parents, friends, even enemies...we choose to love them. We act out our love to the people around us through kindness, justice, compassion, forgiveness, nourishment and acceptance. As we choose to love, we are abiding in Jesus the true vine.

And as we abide, Jesus will fill us, flow through us, sustain us and nourish us so that the fruit we bear in love is his fruit, the fruit of the true vine.

Someone asked this week if it was necessary to love Jesus the most in order to be a true Christian. Well, how do we love Jesus the most? We love Jesus by keeping his command to love one another, we love Jesus by acting in love, through kindness, justice, compassion, forgiveness, nourishment and acceptance to the people around us and to people who live far away. That is HOW we love Jesus, how we abide in Jesus and how Jesus abides in us.

If we abide in Jesus, Jesus will abide in us. We make Jesus our dwelling place and he promises to dwell within us, to sustain us, to nourish us and strengthen us. Amen.