

Abide in Me

COMMUNION

May 2, 2021

John 15: 1-8

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples".

1st John 4: 7-11

⁷ Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸ Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹ God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another.

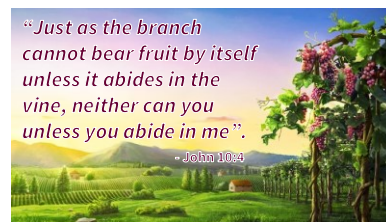


Last Sunday the focus was on living out the truths of our faith in the humble, sacrificial actions that model the love of Christ. Teresa of Avila correctly reminded us the "*Christ has no body but ours*". What was true in the early 1500s remains true today. You and I are the hands and feet of Christ in the world. This morning we look at the source of our strength to live as Christ in the world – our intimate and personal relationship with Jesus Christ. As we prepare to do so today, let us begin with a word of prayer...

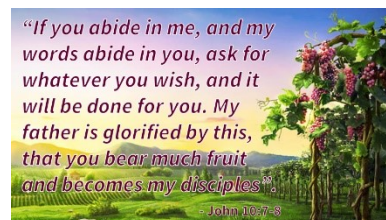
Today we look at what it means to "abide in Christ" – to live day by day in a close and personal relationship with Jesus. Some would prefer to see Jesus as a great teacher who lived and died 2,000 years ago. His moral and ethical teachings are great guides for how to live in harmony with others and for how to treat those we interact with. These guides are, of course just that. Guides and not commandments or absolutes. Still others would prefer to boil Christianity down some version of the "Golden Rule": do unto others as you hope they do unto you or something like that.

In John 15 Jesus uses the branch and vines analogy to help us understand our relationship with the divine. Turn with me to John 15 as we begin this morning. Our passage begins with Jesus defining the characters. He is the "*true vine*", and God is the "*vine grower*". A necessary part of God's job, if you will, is to cut off the nonproductive branches and to prune those bearing fruit so that they will bear more fruit. You and I are the "*branches*". You and I are sometimes cut off and on occasion you and I are pruned from time to time.

In verse four Jesus directs us to *"abide in me as I abide in you"*. Then Jesus connects the analogy to the real world of agriculture. Still in verse four, he reminds us, *"Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me"*. If we do not remain connected to Jesus, we cannot bear fruit – we cannot grow in our own faith and we cannot help to make new disciples.



Jesus reinforces this idea in verse five where he declares, *"apart from me you can do nothing"*. We must abide in Christ if we are to bear much fruit. This is an essential part of our mission to "make disciples for the transformation of the world". If we are not connected to the vine, then we as the branches will wither. That is not a place we want to be, my friends. We are told in verse six, those branches are *"gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned"*. There is a much better option – for you, for me, for God, for the whole world. This is summarized in verses seven and eight. Here we read, *"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples"*. When we are closely connected to Jesus, when we are living in an intimate and personal relationship with our creator, then we live in alignment with God's ways and his will. What we wish for will be aligned with and pleasing to God. Our love for God and for the other will drive all of our words, thoughts, and actions. God will be glorified, and we will bear much fruit as we make disciples for the transformation of the world.





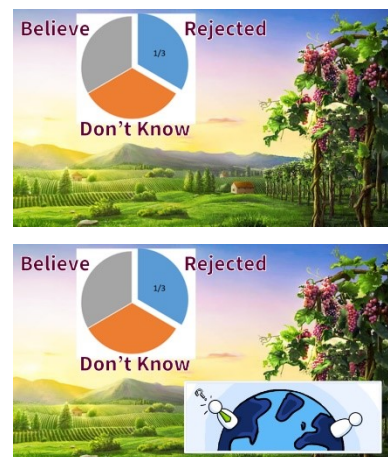
The idea of abiding in Christ has both an inward and an outward focus. One is necessary to the other, much as the vine and branches are necessary to one another. To develop an inward, intimate personal relationship with Jesus we must regularly practice prayer, meditation, contemplation, and worship. These practices open the eyes and ears of our soul to perceive the active and living Christ at work in us, shaping and forming us to be more like him. Jesus practiced these means of grace during his time in a human body. Even though he was God incarnate, Jesus took regular time to pray and study, to renew himself in regular encounters with the divine.

Jesus practiced the spiritual disciplines of prayer, fasting, meditation, and study. Through these practices Jesus cultivated his personal relationship with God. It was so personal and intimate that Jesus called God "Abba", a term of endearment for one's own father. It literally translated to "Daddy". If our commitment to our faith and to following the way of Christ is going to have an impactful and lasting affect on our lives, then we too must experience regular encounters with the divine. We should so personally and intimately know God that we feel as if God were our father. We should be so comfortable with and should be so connected to the creator of the universe that we feel as much at ease with God as we would with our own daddies.

Being connected at the core of our being will lead us naturally to follow Jesus' example of humble service. That inner connection with the Father led Jesus out into the world. The constant, personal presence of the divine in all of his life led

him to be the living and active presence of the divine to and with others. Jesus' focus on serving the poor and the oppressed was a direct manifestation of his loving relationship with God. In the ways that Jesus ministered to others he revealed the love and grace found in his connection to God. The two went almost hand in hand for Jesus. Maybe better put, the inward led to the outward. The deep personal connection to God led to deep personal connections with his brothers and sisters in Christ as well as with the stranger and outcast, the least and the lost. The same should be true for us.

On Tuesday morning I was reminded of a message that Florida pastor Jorge Acevedo gave at Annual Conference when he was the guest teacher a few years ago. He spoke of our call to be disciples living our faith out in the world. In one of his talks, he shared his one-third principle. One-third of the world are believers, they have a relationship with Jesus. One-third of the world has decided to reject Jesus and one-third of the world does not know about Jesus. Jorge shared that our common misperception is that the one-third that does not know Jesus lives on the other side of the world. That fits with Jesus' commission to go to the ends of the earth to make disciples. Many of these in the last one-third are seeking something in their life – like the Ethiopian eunuch in this week's lectionary reading from Acts 8. He was 1,000 miles from home when he encountered Philip. That was like the other side of the world back then. God sent Philip down the road and the Holy Spirit led him to engage the eunuch. Philip explained the good news of Jesus Christ and the man was baptized into the faith.

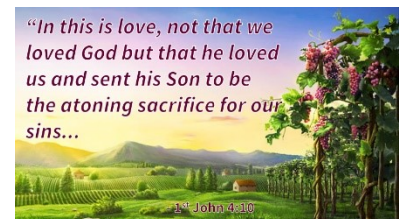


Pastor Acevedo was quick to point out that we, as followers of Jesus Christ, are also called or sent down the road. That road is not on the other side of the world. You are I are sent down these roads. Our task – my task and your task – is to walk down these roads, to find those who have rejected or those who do not know Jesus, seeking to be used by the same Holy Spirit, to be used to draw others towards Christ. To be sent outward, we must have a deep inward connection to Jesus, the source of our faith.

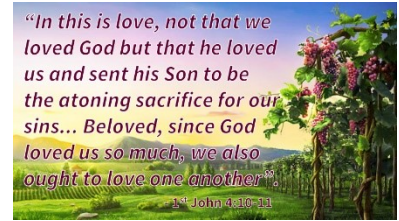


Turning to 1st John 4 we see the source and foundation of this deep connection to God and to one another. I invite you to turn with me to our second reading of the day. In the opening verse, verse seven, John writes, *"Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God"*. Love is the source and foundation of our connection to God and to one another. John reminds us that God's love was revealed among us when God *"sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him"*. The process is unpacked in the correct order in the next two verses.

First, in verse ten we read, *"In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins"*. Love is revealed first by God in the sending of his Son to be the atonement for our sin. Once we understand this expression of love by God, we then return our thanks to God, bringing God the glory.



John puts it this way in verse eleven: *"Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another"*. When we live through Jesus' Spirit alive within us, we act as he did in the world, loving others in humble service and sacrifice. When we fully grasp how much God first loved us, then we are more capable of loving one another.



We must know God not as some abstract being or see Jesus' life and teachings as some nice guidelines that help us navigate this existence. We must see them as the very core of our being and as the source of all that brings meaning and purpose to our lives. We must know God not as some divine cosmic force but as the only source of the unconditional love that we hope to manifest in the world.

Jesus promises us that when we root ourselves in the "true vine" then we will be nourished and that we will be effective incarnations of Christ in the world. This week we are invited to turn inward, to develop our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Again, we do so by investing time in prayer, in Bible and devotional study, in meditation on the word. Developing this personal connection is the prerequisite for our being used as channels or conduits for the renewal and healing of the world. We must invest some time in our relationship with God so that we know which practices and habits connect us most intimately and compassionately to the source of all life. Then we will know how to be filled so that our cup may overflow with blessings into others' lives.

My friends, this week may we invest some time in getting to know God and in getting to know ourselves. Unless we begin our work as followers of Christ where Jesus himself began his ministry – deeply connected to his Abba father – then we are unlikely to have a faith that remains vibrant and active, producing fruit and a harvest of righteousness. When we ourselves experience and know the resurrection power found in Christ Jesus then we can share that gift with the world. Similarly, we must know what it means to be deeply loved and valued before we can help others to feel that they are deeply loved and valued.

Inner peace leads to outer peace. Inner wholeness leads to outer wholeness. Being loved well leads to loving well. May this be our rhythm of regular discipleship. May we dwell in the vine, being living branches of the divine, bringing healing and wholeness to a broken world. As always, may it be so for you and for me. Amen and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. As you consider the spiritual disciplines of prayer, study, meditation, and fasting, which one or two could you add or develop to better abide in Jesus Christ? What is your plan for doing so? How could the church help?
- 2) *Pray*. When or how have you been prompted to “walk down the road” to care for or to minister to another? Pray for Holy Spirit guidance!
- 3) *Study*. Read John 15:18-21. Why was/is it important for Jesus to make the disciples aware of this side of sharing one’s faith? How true is this today?