

Abiding & Loving—But How? – Judy Cox

Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:25-31; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Our New Testament texts today feature a key command: *abide*. Alternative and nuanced translations include: *remain*, *dwell*, and *make-your-home-in*. My favorite (and, not surprisingly, most wordy) is still: *actively-stay-in-union-or-communion-with*.

Today's Gospel reading comes from the Farewell Discourse of Jesus, which makes up most of chapters 13-17 of John. These words are spoken by Jesus privately, to his disciples, on the night before he will be crucified, right after he washes their feet in the Upper Room. In this last of his I AM statements, *I am the Vine*, Jesus says, *you are the branches*. The metaphor would resonate powerfully with them. Vineyards are a common sight around the Mediterranean—if not so much in Bond County! To Jesus' disciples this night, and to the first hearers of the Gospel-according-to-John, this word-picture connected! More than familiarity with its physical characteristics, they understand the symbol of the Vine. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures Israel was identified as the vine planted by God. In Psalm 80: *You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it*. Hosea: *Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit*. Jeremiah: *I planted you as a choice vine*. Ezekiel: *Your mother was like a vine in a vineyard transplanted by the water*. Most significantly, in a word of judgement from Isaiah 5: *My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes...* AND THEN: *For the vineyard of the LORD of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice.*

Yes, the disciples get the symbolism of The Vine. It has become a national emblem representing the people of Israel. In fact, a huge golden vine as large as a man decorates the façade of Herod's Temple in Jerusalem.

We can't say for sure. But immediately preceding our text, Jesus' last phrase, *Rise, let us be on our way*, hints that these words may have been spoken while they were on the move. If so, while walking from the Upper Room in Jerusalem, down into the Kidron Valley and across to the Mount of Olives, they could have seen that great vine gleaming on the Temple in the moonlight. We can imagine Jesus gesturing, *I am the true Vine, you are the branches*. How important, how reassuring that would have been to the gospel's first readers! As Dr. Hartley recently reminded us, these Jewish followers of Jesus Messiah, living half a century after the Resurrection in pagan urban centers of Asia Minor, had been cast out by their local synagogues. They were being called heretics by the other Jews; both groups were struggling to establish their religious identity within the Roman Empire. How affirming to hear these words of their Lord's, *I am the true Vine, you are the branches*. In other words, Jesus is the true Israel; he, and his followers in Him, are the true Israelites!—despite the names post-Temple Judaism is calling them.

But Jesus is speaking much more than a reassuring contrast with the hostile Jews. He also speaks of God's intentional involvement in the lives of his disciples, then and now. The Divine Vinegrower lifts up and takes away the undergrowth without fruit. Branches bearing a little fruit are helped to make more by divine pruning—literally, by “making or trimming clean.” This loose, flexible word shows up again in Jesus' very next sentence: *You all have already been made-or-trimmed-clean by the word I have spoken to you*. (He used the same expression, just a bit earlier, when washing Peter's feet: *You all are made-or-trimmed-clean—though not all of you...*)

The pruning analogy makes us a little nervous, uncomfortable, doesn't it? We prefer the idea of being “cleansed” more—it doesn't sound quite so, ummm, ruthless! Fewer shears, much less cutting... So, if they're the same word: the “cleansing” is ruthless—and the “pruning” is gentle—and both spring from the

loving intention of the Heavenly Farmer to make us look like Jesus. We individually are being conformed to His image, to Christlikeness. We together comprise His branched body, the Body of Christ! So God the Master Gardener intends to shape us, individually and corporately, through the work of the Holy Spirit. That, my friends, is Good News!

We have a part to play in our shaping. We are commanded to *abide in*, or *stay in union with* Jesus. What does this mean?

Over our sixteen years living in Tornado Alley, staying connected with the weather coverage of our local television stations during the spring storm season affected us in powerful ways, often moving us to a safer place, leading us to take some action. Those sixteen years so affected me, in fact, that I texted my best beloved last weekend (from New York State!) about the Weather Channel's tornado watch alert for Bond County! Okay, maybe just a little over the top... But seriously, in much the same way "abiding," actively staying in communion with the Vine, affects us, shapes us, and moves us to action.

Although there's a difference in the fit of the metaphors, isn't there?!? In our text, Jesus reiterates, *Abide in me as I abide in you...those who abide in me and I in them...you abide in me and my words abide in you!* Our epistle text echoes this mutuality repeatedly, with more "Trinitarian" language: *we abide in him, and he in us...God abides in those who confess that Jesus in the Son of God, and they abide in God...those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.* The communion, the living union with the living God, is two-way, mutual, and reciprocal! Maybe we should change my weather channel analogy to that of a two-way radio, to include that mutual union/communion of this abiding? On the other hand, the two-way analogy falls apart too; yes, the presence is mutual, but the enabling power, including the power to love, comes in just one direction, from Jesus to us—for, *Apart from Me you can do nothing.*

As I studied this gospel passage it slowly dawned on me how much it speaks of contemplative prayer—about attentiveness to God, being in God's presence. God's revelation, through Scripture and the person of Jesus, of Who God is, shapes our awareness in that "abiding." That is, as Jesus says in verse 7, *you abide in me, and my words abide in you.* And all of that is prayer, isn't it?! Too often we identify the next phrase, *ask for whatever you wish*, as the spot where Jesus starts talking about prayer. But prayer includes much more than merely intercession. Whatever the focus of our interaction with God, it is encompassed in attentiveness to and staying in union with our Lord. That seems to me a key element of what "abiding" means!

Paul, in his Areopagus speech, says that all of us humans live and move and have our being in God. Through the Spirit the Triune God intentionally surrounds us, calls to us, and seeks to communicate with us. When we notice and attend, when we turn our attention to God in listening obedience, that's "abiding"! Brother Lawrence writes of it as, "Practicing the presence of God."

The lectionary reserves the verses following for next Sunday's gospel passage, which show that our obedience, and fruitful love, both for God and others, result from our abiding, as branches, in Jesus the Vine. This horticultural metaphor beautifully captures the systemic result of the organic relationship. But where the lectionary taketh away, the lectionary also giveth: today's epistle text leaves no doubt that the "abiding" in God, in God's "perfected love," manifests itself in love for others! The rubber hits the road—no self-absorbed basking in a mystical, privatized "my Jesus, my Bible, and me." We are directed—more than that, organically grown—from love to love. God's *love is perfected* (or matured) *in us.* (Paul similarly states, in Romans 5: *God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.*) Matured, perfected, divine love is always multi-dimensional, reaching horizontally in our human relationships as well as vertically, in our relationship with God. We may prefer to protest a tension between

a life of contemplation and a life of engagement, but God will not allow us to hide behind it. God both calls us to abide in love, and provides the love, love in which we abide and which we extend, faithfully and fruitfully!

Philip, in our Acts passage, demonstrates for us the multi-dimensional and fruitful love growing out of obedient abiding. Attentive to the Lord, he hears the perhaps bewildering word to leave his ministry with the marginalized Samaritans for a wilderness trek from Jerusalem to Gaza. Obediently he sets out and, undoubtedly bedraggled by the journey, finds himself passed by a chariot. Does he feel “left in the dust,” perhaps? The narrator lets us in on a secret not necessarily evident to Philip—that this dark-skinned foreigner is in fact a eunuch, sexually as well as racially “other.” To Philip, he is especially “other” by virtue of class, obviously of high wealth and status. (He travels by chariot, and possesses a personal copy of a scroll!) Running over to join the chariot, again at the Lord’s behest, Philip hears him reading aloud, as was the custom of the day, and realizes he’s reading from Isaiah. (So this foreigner is also educated in multiple languages!) Philip responds with obedience to God and courageous compassion for this foreigner, despite their world of differences. (Barbara Brown-Taylor proposes the parallel of a street preacher in DC, suggesting, and then being invited to, a Bible study in a foreign diplomat’s Lexus. As she observes, *the inclusion in this story runs both ways!*) Thanks to Philip’s obedient and vulnerable risk-taking, this “other” receives the cleansing (cleansing-pruning?) of water baptism, becoming “insider” and family. Here in Acts 8 one of the first of us “outsider” Gentiles is grafted into the “true Israel”—into the Vine!—through the obedient abiding and fruitful love of Jesus’ disciples.

How then, concretely and practically, do we abide as branches in Jesus the Vine, in Whom we have our life? Our spiritual grandfather, John Wesley, cared deeply about helping his followers do this very thing, in order that they might bear the fruit of growing into perfection in love. You might have heard it framed as “standing in the practices;” he called it “attending upon all the ordinances of God,” which he “methodically” ☺ and pastorally insisted include at least these: public worship of God, the ministry of Scripture (either read or expounded), The Lord’s Supper, prayer (family and private), searching/studying Scripture, and fasting or abstinence. Although the last 3 focus on more intimate settings, the first 3 occur, as with us today, in worship in the local congregation. So good on you, you lush green branches, you’ve already been abiding this morning!!! And the best is yet to come...

As is our practice every week, we come to the Table of the Lord, also aptly named, “Communion.” Today we come freshly aware that, as here we are invited to receive and abide in Christ, so here Christ enters into and abides with us; so, and only so, are we able to go out to love and serve God and our neighbor. Thanks be to God through our Lord Jesus Christ!