

John 15:1-11

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Staying constant in our relationship with Jesus

One thing I am not is a gardener. I have two plants in my house that have survived despite me. One, a shamrock, has moved with me every move I have made since I left home at seventeen years of age. Every time it blooms its pretty little white bell flowers I smile and give thanks. The other is just over twenty-five years old. It is a lush vine and the only plant that survive me out of one of those baskets that come with three or four different plants. I don't even know what the vine is called. I am pretty sure people have told me but I always forget.

My husband Ken is the farmer/gardener. He never used to garden, but since we moved away from our hometown farming community he has needed to do something to feel like he has tilled soil and experienced a harvest, so the garden has to suffice at times. Happily for him, Ken is headed off to Alberta in a couple of weeks to appease the farm boy instincts.

When we get to a passage in the Bible that speaks about growing, pruning, burning, I can only speak from a little experience, especially when it comes to vineyards. Still somethings are pretty straight forward. If you cut a branch away from a vine or a tree or a stem from a plant it is going to die. This is just a matter of fact, it is not about judgement, or cruelty, it just is a biological law of nature.

As well, when we get to a passage in the Bible that uses metaphor to explain our experience of Jesus and/or God, we must be careful not to push the metaphor too far. And such has happened at times with this passage. People get stuck on the part where it says, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers: such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned” (v6). This is just a matter of fact. It is not a judgement statement, it is just reality of what happens in life to branches of a vine in a vineyard that are not alive in the vine.

Let's put this passage in context. Though we call this the 5th Sunday of Easter, we have slipped back into the conversation Jesus is having with his disciples the night before his death. At this point the men and women present cannot comprehend all that Jesus is telling them. This story taken from the Gospel of John that we now read was written after the fact, in a time after Jesus death and resurrection, when the followers of Christ could understand more clearly what Jesus was really saying to them earlier about how things would be after his death.

We too have the wonderful vantage point of seeing things through the eyes of history and experience. Through scripture we know of Jesus life, death, resurrection, and ascension. We have the full story. We have the written experience of the disciples after Jesus' death and the letters of Paul.

Reading these words of scripture from John 15 about the vine and the vineyard we have the witness of over 2000 years of people who believed that there was something of value in these words of Jesus. Valuable enough to suffer and in many cases die for. The reasons have not always been valiant, or without being used to further the cause of those in power and authority, but still the witness, the scriptures have endured even the most reckless and unchristian of uses.

And this particular scripture, though at times used to condemn people who have fallen away from faith or are of other faith traditions, is actually directed specifically at Christians – those who know Christ. It was shared with the inner circle of those closest to Jesus. It was to them he was talking, knowing that he was not going to be around much longer to guide, teach, and love them in the flesh.

Jesus wants them to know that he is in them, and they are in him. He says, "Abide in me as I abide in you." This is the crux. Jesus doesn't just say, stay constant in your relationship with me, but he goes further to say that he is staying constant in his relationship with us. Abide in me as I abide in you.

In Jesus we are promised abundant life, fruitful lives. There is still pruning that needs to happen, cutting away, and at times life will be painful. There is no promise of life without hardship. But the constant is the vine – Jesus, and the vine grower - God. And what makes this all good news is the knowledge that we are tended to with love and abide in amazing love. "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete" (vs 9-11).

The commandments Jesus is referring to, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" (Matthew 22:37-38)

So what does it mean to abide. It is not a word we use all that often. We may hear it used in the context of rules, like in game playing, or even the unspoken or written rules of life. We say things like, if he or she would only have abided by the rules, they wouldn't be in this mess. Or we get frustrated when playing a game if someone is cheating. We want them to abide by the rules.

So how do we take that word and understand it in scripture. In the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible that we read from today, Jesus uses the word "abide" eleven times in eleven verses. So it is worth taking a look at it.

If you look up the word, *abide* is defined as, to wait for, to bear patiently, to endure, to live or continue in a place. To *abide by* is to accept the terms of something or be obedient to. There is nothing particularly wonderful about the word itself.

The key here is that *abide*, used as it is by Jesus in the context of mutual love of Jesus for his people, God for Jesus, Jesus for God, God for us, provides a context of how we are to also live with and for one another.

Even I can see, with the experience of my one vine that has survived me, how interwoven the vines can become. It can be hard, if not impossible, to tell where the plant started, what is original and how old parts are now sustaining new growth. Think now of a vineyard. If nothing else this is at least one image or metaphor we can get our minds around as the wine industry is alive and well in the world and in Canada.

Some of you may have even visited a vineyard, so this is not a foreign concept to us as can be the case with so many other images in the Bible. Think of how carefully the vine is pruned, it is not to hurt the vine, but rather to sustain its continued growth and life. Think also of how the branches of the vine are interwoven, connected, they give each other strength. And the purpose of the vine is to bear fruit.

Here, to bear fruit does not mean we are creating disciples or doing all kinds of good works, though it is not exclusive of it either. Still, Jesus was speaking to those who were already his disciples, here bearing fruit will in the future reveal Jesus' disciples.

The men and women gathered around Jesus are about to face their toughest challenges, our own faith lives or dies on whether these people are going to be able to rise up to the challenges they face. And when the Gospel of John was written well after Jesus death, it is believed that these particular Jewish people were facing or had faced being ostracized by their communities for their belief in Jesus.

Their experience of loss, fear, being cut off, alone can be our experience. Each one of us sitting here today is not immune to these feelings. Each of us face many times when we are feeling overwhelmed, on the outside, alone, fearful, if not terrified by our life circumstances, and just as Jesus said then to those he loved, he says now to us. Aide in me as I abide in you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

These words are for those of us who call ourselves Christians. We are to know that we are part of a strong vine in a wonderful vineyard, tended with love and care for each branch. If we stay constant in our relationship with Jesus, understand that to be Christian is not to be alone, but part of a community of faith, of other branches that also experience both challenges and the love of Jesus, then we begin to understand Jesus' great love for us. Jesus abides in us, Jesus loves us. And this all because of God's great love. These are words of hope and joy. And we share them, live by them, and celebrate them, in Christ, with Christ, and through Christ. Amen.