

CUT IT OUT

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John 15:1-8

The word abide is a strange word, isn't it. We find it scattered through today's reading from the Gospel of John. Eight times we encounter this word abide. The only other place where you will find this much abiden is the White House.

Abide is a what I like to call a Bible word. It's a standard English word. It sounds archaic. We rarely encounter it in everyday use. Unless you are channeling your inner Shakespeare, when was the last time you said abide in conversation?

As a Bible word, abide means to stay or remain with, to dwell. To abide means to immerse oneself wholly and completely in some pursuit or occupation. That might sound a bit excessive but think of folk who become immersed in job or family or a hobby. If an athlete wants to reach the top, they have to give everything. They must abide in their commitment and training.

And what about those folk whose lives center around their favorite sports team. You know, the family with the bright orange Winnebago that travels to every UT game no matter where it's being played. They named their dog Neyland after the stadium. They named their son Smokey.

We all abide in something in some way or another—choosing how we will live, establishing our priorities. As Christians, the question we must ask is this: Are we abiding in Jesus? Do we permit Jesus to abide with us?

The answer we should want to give is, "Yes, I abide with Jesus." As a pastor, that should definitely be my answer. And it is...most of the time. But if I am honest, then I must confess that there are temptations and situations that often pull me away toward other pursuits.

Our passage today comes to us from the Gospel of John. Of the four gospels in our New Testament, the Gospel of John is by far the lengthiest. However, despite its size, it is missing something that we find in the other gospels—parables, those wonderful teaching stories told by Jesus. In John's gospel, there is no good Samaritan, no prodigal son, no wedding feast, no hidden treasure, no lost sheep.

However, what we do find in John are the "I Am" statements. These are as close to parables as we will find in this book. There are seven of Jesus' I Am statements—I am the good shepherd, I am the bread of life, I am the light of the world, I am the door, I am the resurrection, I am the way. And in our reading today Jesus proclaims, *I am the true vine*.

I am the true vine is a metaphor that Jesus employs to help his followers understand how they are to live their lives when he is gone, how they are to lead fruitful lives. Jesus explains that he is the true vine. By true vine, he means the main vine of the grape plant. And to fully understand what this means, we need to talk pruning.

Mature grape vines have trunks that are about six to ten inches in diameter. The plant emerges from the ground and splits into branches.

Through the centuries, grape growers have figured out that to produce the best grapes they must prune their grape vines. This is normally done at the end of the plant's dormancy period, usually in late winter. The most common mistake people make is not pruning aggressively enough. Light pruning doesn't promote adequate fruiting. Heavy pruning, on the other hand, provides the highest quality of grapes—plump, sweet, mature.

For a grape vine to produce new growth, it needs energy. By pruning the excess growth, a grower can force the vine to route its energy into fruit production. By careful pruning, the plant will produce larger and sweeter grapes. It will be more fruitful.

The secret to pruning is that grapevines only produce fruit on one-year-old wood—wood that emerged the previous cycle. Buds on new wood produce flowers that develop into fruit. Buds on older wood produce only leaves or shoots. A vinegrower can expect to remove 70 to 90 percent of the previous year's growth each winter.

One of the challenges of pruning is being able to identify the strongest central vine—the true vine—and then remove the lesser vines. It is the job of the vinegrower to remove any non-fruit bearing branches. Branches that do bear fruit are pruned so they may bear even more fruit.

In our reading, Jesus presents himself as *the true vine* with God as the vinegrower. Jesus' followers are the branches. The branches that fail to bear fruit are sliced off, and those that produce fruit are pruned. It sounds like everyone is getting cut in one way or another.

So, what does it mean to be fruitful? It means that if you are a grapevine you produce grapes, if you are a tomato plant you grow tomatoes, if you are a fig tree you make figs. Being spiritually fruitful is to fulfill what God has ordained for us.

If the disciples are worried that they are about to be cut off, Jesus reassures them that they have already been *cleansed* by the words that he has spoken to them. In Greek, this word *cleansed* has the same root (no pun intended) in the Greek as the word *prune*. The disciples have already been cleansed (or pruned) by

Jesus' teachings. They are ready to produce. That is a word of encouragement for us all. How do we become fruitful? Follow the words of our savior.

This image of the vine is not meant to frighten; it is meant to comfort as we find when Jesus says, *Abide in me as I abide in you*. There is a relationship between the branch and the vine. If you abide in me, Jesus tells them, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, however, spiritually there is not much you can do. Jesus warns, if you do not abide in me, you will be cut off and tossed in the burn pile.

But then there is the promise, *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, he says, is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples*. In other words, if we immerse ourselves in Christ and his teachings, we will be fruitful. By being fruitful, we will glorify God.

To abide in Jesus is to have faith, to believe, to follow, to obey. To abide in Jesus is to live in a close, intimate relationship, like a branch growing on a vine.

This passage is a teaching to all disciples—past and present. Jesus may not be present with us in person, but we are connected to him like branches on a vine. We can abide in him.

However, this proximity to Jesus does not mean that we can simply hang around doing nothing. It's not like Spring Break where we just lie on the beach and soak up the sun. We are expected to bear fruit—what the Apostle Paul terms *fruits of the spirit*. And if we don't, there will be judgment. But as branches connected to the vine we are part of the body of Christ with all of the rights and responsibilities thereof. Christians are meant to be connected to Christ and to one another. We function as Christians when we are connected through the vine. It is how God created us.

There is much in our lives we can abide in. We can abide in our jobs, in our pleasure, in our wealth, in our idols. Each of these may produce fruit, but none are the *fruits of the spirit*. However, when we do abide in Christ, then other parts of our life will be come fruitful. We will find joy in our friends, our family, our work, and our play.

As I mentioned earlier, on the grapevine, the dead wood is cut off and the producing wood is pruned. Everyone is going to feel some pain. But this pain is what pushes us forward to try new things, to serve in new ways. Complacency does not produce. Christ challenges his followers to bear fruit. It is better to suffer the pain of being pruned than the pain of the fire.

Jesus declares to his followers *I am the true vine* not to frighten us but to remind us that he is always with us and that we are connected to him. He is the vine, we are the branches. He is the body, we are the church. We are in communion.

Over the past year, through this pandemic, most of us have felt as if we've been pruned—and pruned with a dull, rusty axe. Few of us will claim that it has been the best of times. We have all lost something. And now, thanks to the genius of science, we may be on our way back to normal. So, as we enter that transition, it is a perfect time to reevaluate our lives and reexamine if what we are doing is truly “fruitful”—does it bring glory to God. We need to examine not just our own lives, but the life of our church as well. It may be time to initiate our own little Reformation and reevaluate what we do and determine if we are truly bringing glory to God. I believe we will find that there are some parts of our lives that we simply need to cut out, or maybe we will discover that something we lost this year just wasn't that important.

One last thing—being fruitful for God is not about quantity. We are not in a competition to produce the most grapes. If your good works help the lives of thousands, then wonderful. If you are only able to offer prayer and words of encouragement then you will certainly glorify God by doing just that. God knows. As the choir sang in their beautiful anthem this morning, “I am the vine, you are the branches; believe, you will be free, be free.”

Your homework for this week is to sit with this passage, reread it, study it, pray with it and evaluate how you are bringing glory to God. And whatever you are doing that is not bring glory, then cut it out.

Amen.