

"Abiding in Christ"
A Sermon by the Rev. Scott Herr
First Presbyterian Church, New Canaan – May 2, 2021

PLEASE READ:
John 15:1-8
I John 4:7-21

Yesterday's leadership retreat was such a gift because for the first time since I've been here, we were able to connect as leaders in the same room together, still masked, mind you, but in-person together! We worshipped and talked about goals, but the main gift for me was that we were *together*! For all of the benefits of virtual reality and connecting with Zoom and other online apps, it is different than really being together! I love the fact that we Presbyterians stress the fact that we are a *connectional church*. We believe the Holy Spirit acts in a special way when we gather and spend time together.

Jesus says in today's lesson: "I am the vine, and you are the branches...Abide in me." Stay connected. Live in me, and I'll live in you. What a comfort that is. This verb "to abide" is important in John, where love of God means *mutual indwelling*. The verb abide has a cognate; and this noun appears in one of John's most famous verses, 14:2. The many mansions in the Father's house (in the KJV) are actually *abiding places*. This invitation to dwell with God is at the heart of Christian spirituality.

As NT Wright puts it, today's text is "one of the classic statements of Christian spirituality." But what is Jesus really talking about? Gerald Kennedy, a Methodist Bishop of the last century, once remarked that the Methodist church was so well organized that it would flourish in America long after Christianity had ceased to exist." Anglican mystic Evelyn Underhill posed the matter this way: "God is the interesting thing about religion." In other words, Jesus is not talking about *institutional religion*. He's talking about a *divine relationship*. He says simply, "Abide in me as I abide in you... Apart from me you can do nothing." We are reassured by Jesus that our very source of life is found in him. As we stay connected to Jesus, we will have life. Abiding in Jesus, being connected as branches on a vine, is a powerful image of Christian spirituality.

It is well to be told by Jesus that he is the true vine and that we are his well-attached branches. But Jesus says that God, the vinedresser, "removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." It's a tough thought, but one that is found elsewhere in the New testament. If we don't "bear fruit," if there are no results from our discipleship, then there is a consequence. I'm curious when someone tells me, "I don't go to church, but I do consider myself to be spiritual." I want to ask them about what type of spirituality? Everyone, as far as I'm concerned is spiritual. My interest is always what is your spirituality all about? And how is that working out for you?

In our passage today, Jesus is saying that Christian spirituality is a spirituality that bears fruit. And to be fruitful, you need to stay connected. The fact is, you can't abide in Christ without spending time in Christian community, learning about Christ, working for Christ, praying and submitting to Christ, serving under Christ, and bearing the fruit of Christ's self-giving love. It was G.K. Chesterton who wrote, "A man can no more possess a private religion than he can possess a private sun or moon" (Book of Job). As flawed as Christian community may be, we need one another to bear fruit.

But Jesus says that every branch that does bear fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit. And here's the point which causes most concern in me. You get the knife either way! One might expect the fruitless, faithless branches to be cut and cast away. That's all fine and good. But the pruning, the cutting, doesn't stop there. Even the fruitful, faithful branches are pruned.

Here is not a soft, warm and fuzzy spirituality. This is sharp. You might as well get this straight, that cultivating a rich and fruitful life in Christ involves getting cut; pain and suffering. There's no way around it. In order to abide in Christ, we must set aside any illusions that discipleship does not and will not for us involve personal cost.

Which paradoxically is the only way to abundant life. For our twentieth wedding anniversary Kim and I took a trip to northern Italy to stay at a friend's vineyard B&B. We had a cozy little cottage set on a hillside in the middle of an active wine vineyard. It was pruning time and I was astonished at how many branches were cut away from the vine. In fact, 95 percent of the vines each year are cut away by a master pruner and only one vine is left for the following year to start a new growth. It reminds me of a quote that has always been perplexing to me by Warren Buffett. He says, "The difference between successful people and really successful people is that really successful people say no to almost everything!" I'm not sure I agree with him on that, but I do understand you can't do everything. You have to stay focused and stay true to your priorities... That's hard. It's painful to say "no." But every time we say yes to one priority, it may mean saying no to a whole set of other priorities...

Simply put, saying yes to Jesus will involve experiencing suffering. I'm not saying that Christ meant wants us to suffer, but I'm saying that learning to live out a life of the self-giving love of Jesus will involve suffering. Sometimes it is just bearing witness to suffering, like the 1-1.5 million Armenian men, women and children who were driven into the Syrian desert and left to die. Or the thousands of victims of gun violence, and the disproportionate numbers of black men killed by police in this country and the legacy of slavery and lynching.

So many of these people are brothers and sisters in Christ, and they would be the first to humbly remind us on this fifth Sunday of Easter that we worship the *crucified* Risen Lord. Christ stands grieving with us when we are being pruned, cut to the heart; that in him, we may find strength for greater faithfulness and fruitfulness.

Our Gospel points to the paradoxical truth that abiding in Jesus means that we will suffer, indeed, that our discipleship may involve even deeper struggles precisely because we know that God is a God of love, that God can yield a greater harvest even through suffering when we suffer to love our neighbor and to help realize justice for all. We, even more than the faithless person, have to struggle with those times of getting pruned, of painful wounding trusting that, as Paul writes, "all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to God's purposes..."

So yesterday we had our leadership retreat, and special thanks to Cindy Graziano for her facilitation of about 25 Elders and Deacons and staff who attended. It was a time of worship, discussion and attempting to answer the question, What does God want us to be doing as a congregation? And what does that require of us?

We focused on larger themes for our church, that we are here to welcome more and more people, but also to reengage each of our members fellowship and service. We know that a healthy church is a growing church. We are here to be actively involved in God's healing and reconciling work in the world, which means that we are here not just for ourselves, but for our neighbors, our town. Our mission is to go out into the world with both words and deeds of God's love.

We are called to be a community that bears fruit. And the main fruit in Christ should always be love. We should always be asking ourselves: Is whatever we're doing helping us to become more loving people or not?

Scott Peck, in the *Different Drum*, tells the story of "The Rabbi's Gift." A monastery had fallen on hard times. There were only five monks left. In desperation, the Abbot went to a neighboring rabbi for advice. The rabbi said, "I have no advice to give you really. The only thing I can tell you is that one of you could well be the Messiah." The abbot brought this thought back, but he really didn't know what to make of it. In the months that followed, they pondered the thought. Without realizing, they began to treat each other differently. There was a new sense of love and respect. Others were attracted to their order. The monastery took on a new life. You get the point... How our community life will change as we see the *imago dei*, the face of Christ in all people...as we realize that we are all connected, or as I like to say, "Small world, big family!"

One last thing... Did you know that the root of our word fruit comes from the Latin *frui*, which simply means *to enjoy*? In other words, bearing fruit is something that God does in us for our communal enjoyment and blessing. Remember that classic first question and answer of the Westminster Catechism? What is the chief end of humanity? To glorify God and *enjoy God forever!*"

As we prepare to come to the table today, and as we look to the future together as a congregation today, consider what does it mean for you to abide in Christ? How are you called to more deeply connect with others and with what God is doing in the larger world? Whatever it means, we will be more fruitful if we stay connected and serve together. That's the Good News for us today: no matter what profound suffering or pruning we may experience, as we abide in Christ, we will experience new growth, more fruit, and an abundant harvest of joyful new life together.

In the name of the One who is our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. Amen.