

Ephesians 1:15-23 ~ John 15:1-8

Abide in My Love

5th Sunday of Easter ~ Sacrament of Holy Communion

May 2, 2021 ~ Communion Meditation

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Introduction:

How do we feel another's presence, someone we hold dear, after they are gone? After their days on earth are finished. After we no longer get to see their quizzical smile, or hear them say our name. Or feel the balm of their laugh that could lift your mood in a heartbeat. How do we go on, without that person? This is what's going on in the gospel text you are about to hear.

Jesus' days on earth are about to end. He has just washed his disciples' twenty-four dirty, dusty feet, giving them a sensation in the very arches of their feet of what Divine Love feels like. Then he broke the bread and shared the cup: giving them a sacred meal to sustain them and connect them to this Love, after he was gone. A tangible way to taste and to feel his presence within and between them in that moment and for all generations to come.

Next came the text you are about to hear. Jesus' final "I am" statement in John. The most organic, the most dynamic, most interconnected and interdependent "I am" of them all: I am the vine and you are the branches. Yes: Jesus is the true grapevine and we are the branches. Not the Marvin Gaye "heard it through the grapevine" bad news gossip of break-ups and break-downs, but the lifegiving, life-sustaining grapevine of God the Gardener's visceral presence. Right here. Can you feel it? Let's have a listen, as we partake in the sacred words of the nearly departed Jesus to his "next of kin" as I read John 15:1-8.

Communion Meditation:

Did you hear Jesus' invitation to his fearful, tearful, trembling disciples? "Abide in me as I abide in you." "Abide" is a word you may not use every day. But Jesus used "abide" eight times in these eight verses so let's get clear on its meaning. The kind of "abide" Jesus means is "to dwell, or remain, to stay, or to have as one's home." Of course, Jesus is talking metaphorically. There is no such thing as literally living on Jesus' street. That's not a thing. What is a thing, is the invitation from Jesus to choose where we locate our minds, hearts, and spirits, every day. No matter where we actually live, no matter what our address happens to be. No matter if we are sleeping on a friend's couch, or in our car: wherever we are, we have an open invitation to abide in Christ.

Jesus says, "Abide in me." Yes, Jesus not only will *hang in* with us no matter what, Jesus wants to *hang out* with us, inside of us, too. And Christ is depending on us to continue his life-saving work through us. "Abide in me as I abide in you." As Teresa of Avila, Spain said way back in the 16th century, "Christ has no body now on earth but yours." The Risen Christ lives in our bodies as individuals and as our church, the Body of Christ we call FPC--here in Marshfield, Wisconsin.

Can you feel it? Can you feel the life blood of Jesus' compassion coursing in your veins? Christ is here and ready to empower us to do crazy good stuff, like Jesus did. In John 14:12 Jesus said, "very truly I tell you the one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, *greater works* than these." Greater works than Jesus did? Seriously? Our broken, hurting, violent world could definitely use some of that resurrection power.

I think it's the pruning part that holds us back. We want to skip over that part. Or maybe we don't quite understand what he was getting at. If we want to take Christ seriously, we can't ignore how pruning takes center stage in this text. Like it or not, those pruning shears pop out, as soon as Jesus says "I am the true vine and my father is the vinegrower. Then boom: the very next sentence: "He *removes* every branch in me that bears no fruit." That's right, Jesus gets pruned, as we do. Then he says that God *prunes every fruit bearing branch*. No pruning, no growth. No pruning, less fruit. Pruning is the lynch pin here. Like it or not. Pruning, by the way, is the work of the vinegrower alone. It is not our job to "prune" or judge others. That is *not* what Jesus is talking about, at all.

What pruning does God want to do on our old ways of thinking, old ways of doing. What does God want us to unlearn? Perhaps negative self-talk about ourselves, or perhaps fixed and false ideas about our church, our nation. Habits of mind and heart, that keep us from bearing fruit. That keep us from doing "greater works than these." Perhaps we are holding onto beliefs that no longer ring true. Or were never right to begin with. Our Forum for All today at 11:00 on the 21-week Equity Challenge will give us a chance to consider the pruning to which God is calling us regarding the sin of racism: in our hearts and in our social structures.

Pruning, when it comes to the ways that we understand God are in play here, too. What dogmas are now dogging our ability to bear more fruit? In Jesus' words today, God is not a fortress, a fixed, bound structure. Jesus is a vine and we are the branches. We are connected by the organic power of resurrection love and grace. As a church, we have a building that we love, but we are not a building we are a people: living, loving, growing, through pruning, fruiting and branching. Today at Noon, we are about to elect new deacons and elders, branches that will grow us, lead us, restore and re-story us into the church that God would have us be in the next three years.

What needs pruning in your life? In our life as a church together? The answer for each of us is different. One we may share is worrying. Do you find yourself worrying too much? I know that I do. I certainly find myself in this poem of Mary Oliver's.

I Worried

I worried a lot. Will the garden grow, will the rivers
flow in the right direction, will the earth turn
as it was taught, and if not, how shall
I correct it?

Was I right, was I wrong, will I be forgiven,

can I do better?

Will I ever be able to sing, even the sparrow
can do it and I am, well,
hopeless.

Is my eyesight fading or am I just imagining it,
am I going to get rheumatism,
lockjaw, dementia?

Finally, I saw that worrying had come to nothing.
And gave it up. And took my old body
And went out into the morning,
and sang.ⁱ

Does your worrier need pruning? I'm sure mine does. Bring your worrying self to the Table, just as you are and invite God to prune that branch, and any others of which you are aware. There is so much fruit on each branch, waiting to blossom. Jesus is here saying: Come, Abide with me, and I in you. We are not alone: the vine gives us strength to persist and company along the way.

I will close this meditation as we sing and pray two stanzas of the hymn "Abide with Me"
Stanzas 1 and 4.

**Abide with me: fast falls the eventide.
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, O abide with me.**

**I fear no foe, with thee at hand to bless;
ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.
Where is death's sting? Where, grave, thy victory?
I triumph still, if thou abide with me.**

ⁱⁱ "I Worried," by Mary Oliver, *Devotions: The Selected Poems of Mary Oliver*, Penguin Press: New York, NY, 2017), p.59