

“I Am the Vine, You are the Branches”
Sermon Series: Jesus’ “I Am” Statements
Rev. Meredith Loftis
John 15:1-17
Sunday, May 5, 2019

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. 10 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. 11 I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. 16 You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. 17 I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The Word of the Lord.

It was brown. And furry. Barely the length of a finger. And quick as a flash each time it saw me.

And it was eating my tomato plants—MY tomato babies that’d I’d grown from seed and anxiously cared for, for many weeks now. And three were gone.

I had weeded, weeded, and weeded some more to prepare my raised vegetable gardens. Inside my kitchen, snuggled in egg cartons, grew baby seedlings growing top heavy now, their roots seeking earthy depths, and their stems and vines seeking to stretch to the sun. Tomatoes, okra, peppers, squash, kale, and a variety of flowers were waiting for me to prepare their bed. So I pulled the weeds, prepared the soil, mixed in coffee grounds, threatened my dogs to stay out, and weeded some more. I would pull and pull and be filthy each evening with dirt smeared on my legs and arms. And it made me so happy. It really did. It is not unusual to find me out in the dark at late hours watering my babies if I’ve had a long day. And I would not let one vole or pest get in my way. I would abide (or remain) with my plants, prune them, water them, and watch as their fruit grows.

And so, of course I love this scripture today, the imagery it uses, knowing a little about the perseverance and patience it takes to keep a garden healthy and thriving. It speaks of

abundance, and fruitfulness, and evokes in me a longing for that one garden we all long for: the Garden of Eden, where all who knew it tasted of God's true life. And I think that's what Jesus is saying we are capable of doing, if we remain with him. But of course, we are not the gardener or "vinegrower" in this scripture; we are in fact the ones that are planted, nurtured to grow, dead branches removed, pruned to bear fruit. "I am the vine," says Jesus, "and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." This garden is a jungle of remarkable vines tended by God, a garden where love and mercy grow without end, where peace and justice are found abundantly, where God's children bear this fruit into our world that often only tastes of dust.

This section, which includes the seventh and final "I am" statement of Jesus, is part of the Farewell Discourse in the gospel of John. Jesus is addressing his disciples, whom he is trying to prepare for what is to come—his death. He is using this image of a vine, which was often used symbolically to refer to Israel in the Hebrew scriptures and would be a familiar image to them, to explain how they were bound up together.

And so, like many of us would do before we leave our loved ones for a length of time, we leave a set of instructions, a to-do list, a "please don't forget this/this is really important" thing that reminds us that they have expectations of us. And that's what Jesus is doing: giving instructions to us to continue his kingdom-building, creating and sustaining the community of Jesus after he has died.¹ His list is pretty short though. He simply says, "Abide in me and I will abide in you." He says this funny word eleven times in this scripture.

"Abide," he counsels. Remain with me, as I remain with you. Continue with me, and I continue with you. Dwell with me, as I dwell with you. Endure with me, as I endure with you. Be present with me, as I am present with you."² And if you do this, Christ tells us, you will never wither and die. In fact, you will bear new and remarkable things of God, fruitfulness that glorifies God and nourishes you and others. The righteous ones are, states the Psalmist, "like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither."³ This is our invitation and reward if we remain with Christ. This is how our communities of faith are to continue to have life; to abide and see the fruit that results from dwelling with Jesus.

But abiding with Christ, says John, means that we are also to experience God's pruning, within ourselves and our communities. We must endure God shaping us; God pulling out the weeds that pop up around us. God removing old growth. God even removing new growth in order for more fruit to grow. And it can be painful. God does not desire our suffering, but God will work in and through our suffering to produce something life-giving.

"He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." Ok, Jesus, I think I can get that. But he continues, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

It is the harsh and judgmental part of the scripture that makes us cringe. It makes us realize that parts of who we are and the communities that we claim are dead; parts that do not serve God, do not give life, and must be removed; poisonous fruit that we feed on that leaves us even hungrier because it is life-taking, it starves us slowly, while killing some rapidly. It's fruit that are in reality really choking weeds of injustice, poverty, racism, classism, homophobia. All those "isms" that too often we find ourselves feeding on. Or maybe it's addiction, broken

¹ *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Volume 2, page 170.

² *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Volume 2, page 172.

³ Psalm 1:3

relationships, materialism, xenophobia. We all have deadwood that must be removed. “For the follower of Christ, this means that living into the promises of God will come with times when we experience the cutting away of what might seem to us to be vital. Pruning also involves taking off not only the dead, lifeless branches but also those stems that still have life but that may nevertheless inhibit the overall strength and production of the larger vine.”⁴

It means that I need to recognize in myself what is blocking me from connecting with God and with others. Sometimes it’s an abrupt and clashing chaos that we had no idea God was going to send our way. Whether we are a faithful believer or not, we are going to experience God’s pruning. However, scholar Karoline Lewis writes, “Verse 6 [about burning deadwood] is not a verse of condemnation because that is not what Jesus came to do [as we are reminded in John 3:17, “Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.”] Rather, it is a statement of life. Without connection to a life source, abundant life is not possible.”⁵ Dead things will continue to suck away energy and life, if not cleared away. We, Christ’s branches, cannot live without the true vine, though we try hard to.

“The purpose of these verses is to demonstrate that we branches will be cared for by the divine vinegrower who knows just how to develop us, exactly when to prune, when to wait, and when to harvest. A skilled arborist, the vinegrower knows the difference between a dormant plant, which may need extra care and attention, and a dead one. This is a comfort and not a threat; those of us who have borne fruit will bear it again, in God’s good time. Our job is to trust and abide.”⁶ Our job is to abide in those around us who only taste of the chaos this world seems to offer.

So it means learning and relearning again that I am but one branch connected to Christ, the vine. It means acknowledging that other branches, other people around me, are also connected to Christ, and therefore the same source that gives me life, gives life to others. It means that my pruning and fruitfulness affects those around me because we are connected through Christ. If we are the community of branches, when one branch is choked and withers, we feel it too. When our fruit inhibits another from living abundantly, we must rid ourselves of it, and grow new fruit together with those around us where all are nourished.

And there are too many around us in this world, in our very community, that are withering because of forces in this world beyond their control.

I theologize a lot, so I’m going to stop and tell you what’s really been on my mind: my friend Liz. Liz is my sassy, strong, and loving friend who greets me with a kiss on the cheek, has a delightful roaring laugh, and has taught me much about my neighborhood in East Knoxville. She loves her church, Tabernacle Baptist Church, and is often there working in the office, without pay. She worked for FedEx for 37 years, and never imagined that after retiring, she would struggle so much to find decent affordable housing in Knoxville. It has been so prohibitive, or the available housing so poorly maintained, that she had no choice but to move in with her daughter. This affordable housing problem is not only in Knoxville, but is a nation-wide crisis—an injustice that I cannot sit idly by when my friend is personally affected by it. Consider these facts about our own city:

- Almost 1 in 4 families in Knoxville can’t afford housing.

⁴ *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Volume 2, page 172.

⁵ <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3605>

⁶ *Feasting on the Gospels: John*, Volume 2, page 172.

- More than 21,000 low to moderate income families in Knoxville/Knox County pay more than 50% of income for housing costs.
- The average Knox County renter earns \$13 per hour but for a decent 2 bedroom must earn \$16-17 per hour.
- Family Promise, the only family shelter in Knox County, served 21 families in 2017 but had 98 on the waiting list.
- Knoxville lost 770 units of housing in 2017 and more in 2018.
- Volunteer Ministry Center received 759 requests for housing assistance in 2017 but could only help 117; and 2,327 requests for utility assistance but could only help 399.
- There are more than 2,000 families on the waiting list for Section 8.

Tomorrow, over 1,000 people from across Knoxville will gather at Justice Knox's Nehemiah Action to claim there is too much deadwood, too many choking weeds of injustice, and that together we have an abundance that can reveal fruits of livelihood, justice, and mercy. We will gather with other Christians, with Jews, Muslims, and Knoxville citizens to claim that this story of despair and deadwood can be resurrected into something life-giving.

Tomorrow, we gather to dismantle the story of scarcity and despair, of poisonous, rotting fruit; instead, we claim God's narrative of joy, peace, and justice—fruit that we are capable of bearing.

We are able to stand and bear fruits of righteousness because we abide with, dwell with, and remain with Christ, who is the true vine, and upholds his branches. The fruits of justice and mercy are sweet. Let us bear them together and taste of their bounty.