

“Abiding in Love”

Acts 8: 26-40, John 15: 1-8

Easter 5/B, May 10, 2009

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I may be many things, but I am not a master gardener. I don't have a brown thumb, I have a black thumb! I look at plants and they wither. Honestly, I'm not sure I know what the term means, but I know many of you do. I have learned everything I know about gardening and plants from my friend Carol Quish. Carol works at UConn. She answers a horticultural help line there. People call in distress about some ailment they have noticed in a prized plant or tree. Carol listens intently and then offers a solution to help them fix the problem and bring their tree or plant back to health. If I were to ask, she could fill hours teaching me about plants and plant diseases. While I have little opportunity to apply the wisdom she imparts to me, I so appreciate her passion. Carol speaks about plants and the diseases or insects that wreak havoc with them the same way I speak about scripture. She speaks with authority and excitement that tells me she really loves what she does.

For those of you who enjoy gardening, today's gospel lesson makes much more sense. For the rest of us, what Jesus says seems counterintuitive. How could stripping a vine of branches or leaves make it more productive? This seems ridiculous for those who believe as our culture does that “bigger is better.” Taking something away can't make it bigger or stronger or more productive. We value the biggest, the fastest, the smartest, even if you have to lie or cheat to get that way. The farmer that grows the biggest pumpkin at the county fair is most envied. The player that breaks the record for hitting home runs is lauded until we find out he used illegal substances to do it. It doesn't matter what it takes to achieve a particular result. In fact, we would rather not know because if we did, we would have to wrestle with our conscience.

What Jesus teaches his disciples makes us uncomfortable in several ways. First, some people have used this passage about the vine and the branches to justify their claim that Jesus is the only way to salvation. This is a spiritual truth that many people have wrestled with through the ages. I am the true vine has come to mean I am the only vine. In this story Jesus is talking to a group of believers teaching them how to remain strong and fruitful in the days after his death. They will be able to undertake his ministry if they remain connected to the source of their being, to the true vine. Jesus is the vine, God is the vinedresser and we are the branches. We can not do it alone. We are only one part of the equation. Jesus does not say that we can not be worthy, productive people apart from him. However, when it comes to our discipleship he names certain expectations.

What does it mean to remain connected to the vine? How are you connected to Jesus on a daily basis? This is what Jesus wants us to consider. How can we be connected to Jesus if we resist participating in a faith community? How might we discern God's will if we don't know how to pray? How can we be in touch with the Holy Spirit if we shy away from the mystical? When Jesus uses the word “abide” he is speaking the language of intimacy. It takes a profound openness and commitment to be intimate with someone.

This is the kind of commitment Jesus seeks from his disciples. He invites us to be intimately connected to each other and to God.

In order to live as faithful and in the case of this gospel, fruitful disciples, we must submit to a pruning process. In order to live we must die. In order to grow, some of you must be trimmed away. Few of us surrender willingly or joyfully to this pruning process. Even if we know that trimming away the unproductive, unhealthy parts of one's life will make us stronger, we do it reluctantly. Pruning involves a profound level of trust. Immediately after pruning, the bush or plant looks strikingly bare. It is really not so attractive. However, we trust that this process will allow the plant to flourish and become more than we could have imagined.

Pruning is only one part of the process. We must also take care of the plant; water it, feed it, pull up the weeds and give it space to grow. The same is true in our spiritual lives. Confession is at the heart of the pruning process. Through confession we let go of those things that sap us of the life giving energy within us. Naming the ways in which we become disconnected to the true source of our being and then letting them go frees us to become healthier. Every time we get rid of resentment, when we let go of a long held grudge, it is like a branch that is lobbed off and sent into the fire.

Some times we hold on to our pain and frustrations far too long. When we do they zap us of energy and valuable resources we could use to be more productive. We hold onto them because we fear what might happen if we finally let go. As we trust more deeply in this pruning process, we realize that what may blossom is far more beautiful than anything we could imagine. Jesus reminds us that we are connected to a power that makes us stronger, more beautiful and more powerful if we let that power flow freely through us.

A minister tells the story of her evaluation process one particular year. This is a process most of us dread; however when it is over, we can admit how essential it is for the church and our own professional growth. She remembers a question someone asked her. "What in your plans for the coming year, will it take an intervention from God to accomplish?" What an amazing question. No one had ever asked her that before. She learned a valuable lesson in considering this question. Attempting only those things that she knew she could already do well was a convenient excuse for relying upon her own strength. Perhaps God, and her evaluator, was prodding her to stretch outside the boundaries of certainty in ways that would require absolute dependence on God. The very thought of it takes my breath away. What might happen if we considered such a question? Look out Paul DeMaio, the Executive Committee may have some prayerful work before them.

Together we might consider what in our ministries as the church or as individuals requires us to remain vitally attached to God? This is what Jesus was teaching his disciples. He invites us to a level of intimacy we have yet to experience. He says, abide in me, remain in me, and make your home in me. This is the language of intimacy. He warns us to not take this relationship for granted, do not walk away from this relationship when the going gets tough, do not believe what the world tells you about

your own power. Abide in God's love. Let go of the painful things that keep you from receiving this amazing love. Intimacy is difficult. It is not easy to become vulnerable to another person or to an entire community. What if I say or do the wrong thing? What if I make a mistake? What if I am wrong? What if I can't live up to your expectations of me? These are the questions that keep us from becoming more intimate. They are like weeds that threaten to choke off what we can become.

Jesus tells us that the way to be strong and fruitful and bring glory to God is to let go of these insecurities by undergoing a little pruning. When our energies are spread too thin we lose our effectiveness. When we try to do too much, even when what we do is for the church, it will eventually show. In clergy circles we talk about self-care. Some times all we do is talk about it. This concept is not exclusive to ministers. We should all be mindful of self-care. You can't be an effective employee if you work too many hours, don't take care of yourself when you get sick or fail to take vacations or even lunch breaks as you need them. You can't be an effective mother if you fill every waking hour with chores, and appointments and play dates. You can not be the kind of mother God intends for you to be if you equate your self-worth with how much you are needed, or how tidy you keep your home or how well you can multitask. When we do this we become like a wandering vine, shooting off without any purpose.

Self-care isn't just about getting enough to eat and 8 hours of sleep each night. Self-care may include being in a peer group to whom you are accountable to share both your joys and frustrations in your life or work. It may include being in therapy or attending an AA meeting or having a spiritual director. Self-care most assuredly involves submitting to a pruning process, where one looks critically and lovingly at those behaviors that do not serve to build up the body of Christ or contribute to life-affirming relationships.

We can not be the people God calls us to be if we have the equation all wrong. There are three partners to this relationship; God, Jesus and you. Jesus tells his disciples: be a branch and let God work in and through you. Be a branch! You can't do it alone. It is not how God intends it. You can do all things in relationship to God and to each other. As long as you stay connected to each other and to Jesus, you will be amazingly fruitful.

We can look around and see the pruning process well underway. For a while, the vine will look bare. In fact, the vine may be mistaken for dead. It will be painful to watch the dead wood removed and thrown into the fire. We trust however, that in God's time, this vine will bear remarkable fruit. We can assure anyone who asks that these things are not possible through our own doing. We are merely the branches. All things are possible, however, as we abide in God's love! May it be so. Amen