5-1/2-21 Abide in Me Rev. Amy Haines

John 15:1-8

On a Thursday night long ago, Jesus gathered with his disciples and followers to celebrate the annual festival of Passover. Yet that holy meal turned into a night they would never forget,

a night that only later they began to understand.

Imagine all that they saw and heard that night. Jesus kneeling like a servant before each one of them and washing their feet. Jesus bluntly announcing one of them would betray him. Jesus giving new meaning to bread and wine. Jesus commanding them to love one another as he has loved them. Jesus encouraging them that they will never be alone due to the presence of the Holy Spirit. Jesus inviting them to continue to abide in him as he abides in them.

They did not know what all was about to occur. Jesus’ arrest and trials. Jesus’ death and resurrection. Jesus’ sudden appearances to women and disciples.

We know and celebrate the rest of the story. How the disciples became bold apostles,

through the power of the Holy Spirit, then until now.

We hear *this* passage on this fifth Sunday of Easter, I believe, because Jesus’ words that Passover night were meant to sustain all disciples as we live as Easter people.

How do we continue to live as disciples of Jesus in the 21st century? We do so through an abiding relationship with Jesus that then sends us forth to bear kingdom fruit in all we say and do.

Jesus said: “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Abide—it is an old-fashioned word. When was the last time you used abide in general conversation? Yet abide is a timeless word, and invites us into the depth of an intimate relationship with Jesus today.

To abide in Jesus means we are to live in, make a home in, and always dwell in a relationship with Jesus. To abide in Jesus means that we will always remain connected to Jesus, through struggles and joys, through tragedies and triumphs, over time and distance. To abide in Jesus means that no matter who we are, no matter what we have done in the past, and no matter what we are facing now in life, we are still with Jesus, listening to his promises, responding to his love and grace.

Today Jesus says to us, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

What a gift to be invited to dwell with Jesus day in and day out!

What a joy to be in such a relationship each and every day!

Yet, this relationship with Jesus may be hard for us to claim, as 21st century independently minded Christians living in America. We want to succeed on our own, not admit we need others, and we need Jesus.

And yet, how many times do you find you truly need other people in your life? How many times in the past year have you yearned for a hug or a handshake or simply to be in the presence of another human being outside your household? How many times do we find we need the support and encouragement of other people?

Ken may not say it, but he was very thankful and a bit overwhelmed by your support over the past month. I have a hefty stack of cards from all over Ohio and beyond sitting on my piano

encouraging me to get well and not overdo it. We need one another.

And we need Jesus. Not only for Jesus to save us from sins and love us, but for Jesus to abide with us, guiding us to live by God’s kingdom ways.

This is a gift we hear today, Jesus’ invitation to abide in him as he abides in us. This is an ongoing relationship we are invited to claim, and like all relationships, to grow in.

Yet abiding in Jesus is not the end goal of our faith. Abiding in Jesus is only the start of our journey. As we abide in Jesus, we are called to bear fruit, fruit that reflects the One in whom we abide. Jesus first offered the invitation:

“Abide in me as I abide in you.”

He then continued:

“Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.”

On Road 6 in Putnam County, just north of Pandora, there is a small vineyard. Grapevines are carefully cultivated to grow on rows of trellises. The goal of the vineyard is to produce a healthy crop of grapes that will later be turned into wine.

Contrast those grapevines with the wild one that used to grow in my mother’s backyard. Our wild grapevine looked rather like a large bush. It was never tended or put on a trellis. Because this vine was never pruned, most years it produced very little fruit, and the grapes it did produce were sour and inedible. Sometimes I would run over the ends of the branches with the lawn mower and by the next week those branches would have withered into sticks, having been cut off from the vine.

The root of any grapevine is the vine, growing out of the ground, providing nourishment to the branches. The branches then grow out of the vine, and on the branches grow the grapes. Grapes will not grow on a branch that has detached from the vine. And grapes will not grow healthy on branches not cultivated, cared for, or pruned.

Jesus proclaimed,

“I am the vine; you are the branches.” “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.”

He is our root, our core, our foundation. From him we are nourished. From him we learn God’s ways. From him we are called to bear fruit, much fruit.

What is that fruit? It is…

The love of God evident in our love for others.

The word of God lived out in our daily lives.

More branches grafted into the vine, as more believers are brought into the family of God.

When you are a branch connected to the vine of Jesus, the fruit you produce ought to be…

love, not hate; compassion, not judgment;

generosity, not stinginess; honesty, not lies;

service, not greed; peace, not division;

kindness, not rebuke; hope, not despair.

Pastor Florence Canada once said,

“The [first] disciples were to continue the work Jesus had started—the work of saving, healing, delivering and setting free those who were trapped in illness and sin; the work of teaching, preaching, and living the gospel; the work of praising God, worshiping God, and giving God the glory through their lives. That is the fruit: fruit that is manifested in lives transformed and improved by the power of the Holy Spirit.”

--AWPA 3-B, p.111

We will only produce the fruit of the vine to which we’re attached.

Are we more attached to the values of our culture or the values of our God?

Will we stay connected to Jesus, or connect to someone or something else?

Jesus’ words are not words of judgment, but words of warning and reality. Apart from Jesus we cannot produce good fruit. Apart from Jesus we are like withered branches. Apart from Jesus we can do nothing.

While God will never give up on us, continuing to coax good fruit from us, we may choose to disconnect from God and seek to go our own way. Trust me, that path will never end well.

How many times have I heard in the past year, how do people without faith handle the struggles of life? How do they approach death with no hope?

Jesus constantly calls us to be grafted to his vine, to be connected to his life-giving grace,

to get our nourishment from spiritual disciplines such as prayer, devotions, worship, service, study, fasting, giving, and fellowship, disciplines that draw us closer to God and God’s word.

Yet Jesus is also real with us—any cultivated branch will be pruned. He also said: “I am the true vine and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.

Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed/pruned by the word that I have spoken to you.”

Notice every branch is either pruned or removed. No branch is immune from pruning.

Think of God as our master gardener. Even when we are growing in love and grace,

even when all is going well, we are pruned to produce good fruit.

Grapevine branches are too valuable to be left to grow wild. A grapevine needs direction on where to go and when to quit. Without pruning the branches will get too thick for the sun to penetrate. Without direction the branches will spread out on the ground, mixing with the dirt and mud, and producing grapes that are only healthy on the top side if at all.

…In the vineyards of Jesus’ day, grapevines grew naturally along the ground instead of being propped up on poles or lattices as they are today. The vinedresser would come along to lift and “clean” the vine, pruning away the excess and dead growth. Jesus uses the same image to describe the way the disciples themselves had been “cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” (v. 3). That “word” was the teaching and commandment of Jesus and the disciples’ meditation on and obedience to that “word” would help them “remain” or stay connected to his “love” —the nourishing flow from the vine (v. 10).

-Homiletics 5-10-09 “How to be a Branch”

Pruning does at first seem counterproductive, especially when in the midst of an abundant harvest, yet healthy and sick branches alike must be pruned in order to encourage new growth.

As the people of God, as the church in the 21st century, as a congregation who will soon be welcoming and following a new pastor, if we are all to bear fruit as kingdom bearers, then we must be open to pruning.

This past year has been a pruning for the church at large, as we embrace new forms of sharing the gospel via technology while recognizing that some of what we’ve always done is not healthy for sharing the love of Jesus.

This past year has laid bare the insular focus of the church at large, when we are called to focus on those not yet here, those outside our walls.

As a congregation in the midst a pastoral change, consider asking yourselves these questions

in order to be ready for Pastor Joe:

What needs to be pruned in our hearts and minds in order to be open to the leadership of a new pastor?

What mindsets and attitudes need to be pruned in order to be open to something new and not resistant to change?

What activities need to be pruned away from the church calendar in order to be less focused on ourselves and more focused on our neighbors?

Pruning is hard work. Yet pruning done right makes us stronger. Pruning done right bears more fruit. Pruning done right brings us closer to Jesus and Jesus’ ways.

As we look ahead to the next few months, may we all be open to God’s pruning.

I know that personally I have had to re-learn how to let go over this past month, and to trust God and others that the ministry will continue without me. In my new position I have to let go and let God in many, many ways.

I know that the only way churches will thrive rather than simply survive is to remember their foundation in the root that is Jesus, and remember that all branches are grafted into the same vine.

I know that the church of the future may not look at all like the church of the past, even in as few as 5-10 years. How do we make the hard decisions of what remains, what is laid to rest, and what we are willing to try, to share with others well the hope and love and grace of God?

Jesus continues to offer us the invitation, “Abide in me as I abide in you.”

Remember this is a gift, and a calling!

Whenever we are overwhelmed by change, by circumstances, by struggle, may we remember that we are branches rooted in the vine of Jesus. We do so by once again listening to and following Jesus’ final words to his disciples, words that reach out to us today.

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and be my disciples.”

May we embrace Jesus’ words as we continue to live as followers of Christ here and now and into the future.

May it be so. Let us pray.