

Today’s lesson is read from John 15:1-11

Hear the words from John:

Read John 15:1-11

“The Word of God for the people of God.”

“Thanks be to God”

Let us pray:

O Lord, let the words of my mouth, and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

As you all know last Sunday I began a sermon series on the final “I am” sayings found in John 15:1-11. Just coming off the heels of Jesus promising the Paraclete (also known as the Holy Spirit) to his disciples in chapter 14, Jesus prepares his disciples to face life without his visual presence.

[Read John 14:25-29]

Then Jesus begins his vine imagery in verse 1, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower...and He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Even branches that bear fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” Last week’s message of God the Master Gardener who comes into his vineyard with a knife and severely cuts every plant may have been hard for some of us to hear. Some are cut away, removing them because they are fruitless, and some are pruned in order to be more fruitful. But I asked how are we the church to know the difference? Both the cutting for removal and the pruning for fruitfulness are equally painful, isn’t it? Isn’t pruning often understood by us who suffer the pain of the loss of a loved one, or the conclusion of a meaningless pursuit, or the splitting of a relationship that burdens us feel the same as being cut away from God? Doesn’t that feeling leave those that believe in a benevolent God hurt, confused, and

angry? It does. But I remind you all again that maybe we the church experiencing extreme hardships in life, like the church John is writing to here 2000 years ago, need to hear that we could be undergoing pruning for greater fruitfulness. And as a church we know about extreme difficulties seeing our circuit that once had four churches now down to two. And the fear of the dwindling numbers in the pews cause us to despair over the commitment we made to the church’s mission of making disciples.

You have indeed been pruned and God has certainly removed those that have retreated in concern for their own comfort and security in the face of difficult pruning rather than endure it for a greater relationship, for greater fruit.

So this is the challenge for us today as Jesus knew it would be for the church and his disciples after his death. How do we endure the pruning in order to bear more fruit? How do we in the face of tragedy seek a deeper level of commitment to spiritual intimacy with Jesus? The short answer Jesus gives is to abide in him, the true vine. Instead of commanding us to bear fruit, which only God the Gardener can cultivate, Jesus only commands of us to abide! Another translation of the greek word “meno” is remain. So Jesus’s only command of us in the face of tragedy is to simply remain. But what does it mean to remain in Christ?

In short it means constantly renewing our commitment as disciples. It means allowing Jesus’ words to remain in us by reading, meditating on, and obeying the text of scripture. But in the midst of tragedy this is so hard for us to allow.

After my father’s funeral I spent a week in shock and in disrepair all the while putting a brave face on in being the glue that kept both sides of my family together, feeling that was what I shouldve done as my fathers son, and as a pastor. Going back to

normalcy in Durham, returning to school at DDS for my last semester, I was numb to everything. I found no comfort in the Scriptures, in the teachings from the professors at Duke. The pain was real and I braved it. Until I read Julian of Norwich’s Revelations of Divine Love. [Explain her revelation of the passion on her death bed.]

It was her revelation of Christ’s divine love on the cross that broke my wall of pain. And as I read her work more and more I cried. I cried for my father, I cried for others, I cried for myself, but I cried for Jesus most of all because I understood again in a deeper more intimate way what Christ did for me; for all of us. I felt what it means to abide, to remain, even in the midst of tragedy.

Yesterday I was watching Game Day on ESPN and they were in Lincoln Nebraska. And I saw two signs. One said, “the reality is life is tragic. Don’t give up, Jesus offers compassion, not a system of Christianity.” The other said, “Study the scriptures, discover the living Jesus, not a church, not a religion.”

The message of that is inescapable. Discover the living Jesus! The relationship of Christ to us, the church, individually and globally is possible. But this relationship is necessary made evident in both Scripture and experience. Without scripture and experience the church is powerless, wordless, prayerless, fruitless, and hopeless. The purpose of remaining, in abiding is primarily to bear fruit, and to bear fruit is to be pruned.

The reality is life is tragic. Don’t give up, Jesus offers his love. But I’d add one more to the sign. Allow yourself to be healed by Jesus’s love. Study the scriptures and you will discover again the living Jesus; the true vine that remains in you. If you’ve ever felt far from God, this is how we stay near and remain close to Him.

Let us pray: