

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, pleasing, and perfect in your sight, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

Intro:

So here we are, part three of bearing fruit, the concluding part to my sermon series on Jesus’ final “I am” sayings found in John 15:1-11. Having heard this passage three times now and exhausting everything there is to know you all are probably scholars and theologians of this text by now. I bet any of you could come up here and deliver an inspiring sermon on John 15:1-11 and what Jesus means by calling himself the true vine or what Jesus means by calling God the Vine-Grower. No? Well, let’s have communion then. [joking]

If you can recall, we are here in John 15, Jesus is giving his “I am” the vine imagery lesson to his disciples just after promising the Holy Spirit to them in the previous chapter. Jesus does this to prepare them for life without his visual presence, although he will remain with them always in the Spirit if they continue to remain in him. And that’s a pretty big IF. The if is central for our message today. But lets back up...

So far, two Sundays ago we looked at God the Master Gardener who comes into his vineyard with a knife and severely cuts every plant, removing them because they are fruitless, and some are pruned in order to be more fruitful. We learned that both the cutting for removal and the pruning for fruitfulness are equally painful, which brought us

to last Sunday’s message: We endure the pruning in order to bear more fruit by abiding in Jesus, the True Vine. And as we learned, abiding in Jesus, means to “remain close”, to remain in our continuous commitment as disciples by reading, meditating on, and obeying the text of Scripture. This is the secret to remaining close to God in the midst of tragedy or pruning when we feel far from God.

Which brings us to today’s lesson, when Jesus says, “I am the vine, 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.” If those words aren’t blunt enough, 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.”

I have mentioned I’m not much of a gardener, but I have seen jasmine vines before and know the stories of kudzu growth in the south. Neither care one whit about personal space. It’s a messy, curly, jumbly thing. It stretches, it spreads, and it invades. It grows in all kinds of tangled up directions, and its densely interwoven tendrils are just about indistinguishable from each other.

If this is Jesus’s metaphor for the spiritual life, then I think Lutheran pastor Nadia Bolz Weber says it best: Christianity is a lousy religion for the “I’ll do it myself” set. We are meant to be tangled up together. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole. In this metaphor, dependence is not a matter of personal morality or preference; it’s a matter of life and death — branches that refuse to cling to the vine die.

My problem, though, is not that I don't believe this, but that I don't want to believe it, because it's inconvenient and offensive. It implies that my life is not my own. That my choices affect people I don't even know. That I am bound to the community of God's people whether such boundedness suits my viewpoint or not. Worse, it requires me to hold two contradicting truths in continuous tension.

One: (that I don't matter) that the point of my Christian life isn't all about me — my growth, my cleansing, my contributions, my achievements. I am forever connected to a larger whole, and apart from that whole, my spirituality — profound and precious though it might feel to me — is without value. Apart from the vine, I am not only barren; I am dead. In other words, I'm not the fruit in this metaphor. I'm not supposed to be the end product of my own spiritual life.

And two: that I matter more than I can possibly imagine — that every branch matters more than I can possibly imagine — because the fruitfulness of God's vine is no trivial thing — it constitutes the life and nourishment of the world. I read a little bit about grapevines this week. Apparently, the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are the most concentrated. To cut myself off from the vine, then, is to diminish my fruitfulness. It is to deny the world the fruit of Christ's saving, cleansing, healing love.

If God is the vinegrower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, what should we do? We have only one task: to abide. To tarry, to stay, to cling, to remain, to depend, to rely, to last, to persevere, to commit, to continue, to tolerate, to endure, to give in, to accept. To hang in there for the long haul. To make ourselves at home.

It’s a tricky word. Passive on the one hand, and active on the other. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It’s a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we’ll get pruned. It’s a risky verb: if we abide, we’ll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It’s a humbling verb: if we abide, we’ll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making. And it’s a relentlessly communal verb — if we abide, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches. We will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled, and gorgeous. A life that’s deeply rooted and wildly fertile.

I can’t imagine that there was ever a time when Jesus’s followers found the metaphor of the vine easy to apply in daily life. But I also think that it’s especially challenging to do so now. We live in bitterly divided times. We have good reasons to be cautious and self-protective, even within the Church. It’s hard in our self-promoting culture to confess that we are lost and lifeless on our own. That our glory lies in surrender, not fortification.

Equally hard is the spiritual and imaginative leap we must make in order to trust the metaphor at all. As in, really? Jesus really isn't just a wise teacher? A good role model? A provocative historical figure? He's really the very source and sustainer of my life?

“I AM the vine,” he told his disciples. “You ARE the branches.” It’s a done deal. Meaning that whether we like it or not, our lives are bound up in his and in each other’s. Meaning that the only true life we will live in this world is the life we consent to live in relationship, messy and entangled though it might be. Meaning that the only fruit worth sharing with the world is the fruit we produce together.

Yes, it’s difficult. But it’s also easy. Remember: our Vine is true and our Vinegrower is skilled. This is what we were made for. Abide.

Today, we will experience Holy Communion, intentionally remembering that this table extends into worship spaces throughout the world. We join as branches with our sisters and brothers through a sacrament, this “holy mystery,” that is rooted in our connections as the body of Christ.

Together, we will create fruitful opportunities for students (the roots of our family tree as children of God) to live into the purpose and grace to which God has called them. How might we offer a spirit of power and love to God’s beloved children who continue to abide?

Let us pray:

Dear Heavenly Father, As we approach the table of grace on this World Communion Sunday, I invite everyone here to allow the Holy Spirit to take root in your hearts. I encourage you to remember the generations that have come before and to rekindle the gift of God that is within you. By receiving the bread and cup you abide near to God and have the promise of the Holy Spirit and eternal life. Praise be to God who gives us such gifts and abides in us! Amen.

Offering

Generous God, may the faith of our ancestors continue to live through us as we present our gifts today.

Bless those who, through receiving support
from the World Communion Sunday
offering, will pursue their dreams and grow
in your love and grace. Amen.

Benediction

We have praised God, been fed and
nourished, and are sustained in our faith.
As we go from here, let us respond to the
holy calling:
to be hope,
to invite others to the table of grace,
to share our resources and
to be a voice for justice, sharing the words
and teachings of Jesus Christ.