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Stay Close to the Vine
John 15:1-11

“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^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed^[b] 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^[c] 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.

I was reading this week about a *missionary in Africa who had a small generator* that supplied electricity to his church and rectory.

One day people from a neighboring village came to his home,
And saw the single bulb hanging from his ceiling,
and watched in wonder as he flipped a switch and turned the light on.

One of the visitors asked for a lightbulb,
and thinking he wanted it for a trinket,
the priest gave him an extra bulb.

On a later visit to this man’s home, the priest *saw that bulb hanging in his hut,*
from an ordinary string.

He then had to explain the need for electricity
and a wire to bring power to the bulb.

Msgr. Arthur Tonne, Five-Minute Homilies on the Gospels of Cycles A,B,C (Hillsboro KS: Multi-Business Press 1977) pg. 86.

How often are *we like the man* who didn’t understand electricity?

How often do we try to *do life on our own?*

Without the power and guidance of Jesus?

What if abiding in Jesus is getting the power and help we need—
to make it through the hard times? To thrive? To bear fruit?

Jesus shares this parable ***on his last night*** ---
after the Last Supper,
and after he tells them that he is going to prepare a place for them,
and will send his Holy Spirit to them.

This is ***Jesus saying---STAY CLOSE to me.***
If you stay close, you'll become ***more and more like me.***
So don't let yourself be disconnected from me and my Spirit.
And don't disconnect from ***one another.***

We all know that a branch not connected to a vine, is dead.
Life comes from the vine.
Jesus is talking about us ***finding life in Him, and bearing fruit.***

And he reminds us that God is the vinegrower tending the whole vineyard,
and doing the necessary pruning so that we not only survive, ***we thrive.***
The ***pruning causes us to bear fruit.***

Some people hear these verses and think of ***God's judgment.***
That pruning means ***God causes horrible or painful things*** to happen to us.
I don't believe that—at all.
What if the pruning is actually a ***promise of hope?***

What if it's more about ***God using everything in our lives,***
and ***removing the things that don't bring us life?***

You know how it can take ***years of watching, waiting and pruning***
to get the best grapes? Or flowers?
In fact, in Jesus' day, grape branches were pruned
for several years before they were even allowed to bear fruit!
Jesus and his followers were very familiar with vineyards and how they work.

They also knew that throughout the scriptures ***God's people of Israel***
had been referred to as a vine—a vine that needed a lot of pruning.
And here, Jesus says—
I AM the vine, you are the branches, and God is the one tending it all.

This is Jesus' *final "I AM"* statement in the Gospel of John, he has identified himself as the *bread, the light, the door, the shepherd, the way, the truth, the life, and now the vine.*

In other words, this is Jesus specifically identifying himself *with God.* God's name is I AM, and now Jesus says that he too is I AM.

This is similar to how Jesus said that the bread and wine of the *Passover meal* was now his own body and blood.

He's taking a familiar image--and *making it personal.*

Can you hear what Jesus is saying?

Because it's so important.

Jesus is saying: STAY CLOSE to me.

Stay connected.

ABIDE.

Like many words in Greek, *abide (meno) is a multilayered word* that means to *remain, stay, be present, endure, be one, or survive.*

Abiding is the ***ONLY way to live and thrive*** on the vine,
And the only way to ***bear fruit.***

And that seems so obvious, right?

We all know we should stay close to Jesus.

And ***close to other Christians.***

The question is---do we?

And when Jesus directs us to do that,

Do we realize it comes with a promise?

Jesus says ***abide in me, as I abide in you.***

As I abide in you.

This is not just a command to be close to Jesus.

It's a promise that Jesus is ALWAYS close to us!

This story can sound threatening or intimidating,
Because being pruned, or thrown away sounds bad!

But what if this is not a ***PREscription of our lives, as much as it is a DDescription*** of life lived close to Jesus Christ.

Nancy Blakely, Feasting on the Word, Year B, Vol 2, pg. 472.

I love Eugene Peterson's *The Message Bible* translation of this.
 He says in John 15:4: ***Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you.***
 This is a promise.
 This is hope, not a threat, or bad news.
 This is comfort---***Jesus is always with us, living within us,***
 Making his home in us, as we make our home in him.

And isn't ***HOME where our hearts are*** at rest?
 Home is ***THE place of acceptance, comfort, hope and peace, right?***
 And Jesus wants us to have a home, in him.

Jesus is explicit though, about what happens to branches that ***do NOT abide.***
 Again, it's not a threat—it's a promise.
 Jesus is simply saying—that those parts of us that are not connected to Him,
 Those branches must be ***pruned***—in order to bear fruit.
 And some of those branches should even be thrown away!

The ***word for pruning*** here is important.
 It's the Greek word ***kathairo***, which means ***to prune or cleanse.***
 And it's actually the ***same root word*** that is used in John 13,
 to describe Jesus ***washing the feet*** of his disciples!
 Think about that!

Pruning is ***NOT a bad thing that happens to us***—it is an act of LOVE.
 But pruning is the act of the vinegrower alone.
 Branches cannot prune one another.
 We don't have the ability or knowledge to prune one another—that's God's job!

But when our hearts and lives are pruned, ***we bear fruit.***
 This is a ***fact.***
 Not a threat, and not another thing for our already busy 'to-do' list,
 But a ***reality.***
 If we are abiding in Jesus,
 and allowing Him to get rid of those parts of us without life,
 then we WILL bear fruit.

Pruning is kind of like deadheading flowers,
 where you take off the first blooms so that the next ones are big and brilliant.
 Or tomato plants when you remove the 'sucker branches'
 that grow close to the trunk but need to be cut off for tomatoes to grow.

But what does it mean to bear fruit in our lives and our church?

What is the fruit?

Well, Jesus has just promised his Holy Spirit to his followers.

And in Galatians 5:22 Paul describes the fruits of the Holy Spirit. They are:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control.

So, fruitfulness is life, full of these gifts.

Fruitfulness is not necessarily the same thing
as the values we usually admire in the world.

As one wise pastor said,

Fruitfulness is not synonymous with success.

It is not the same thing as “winning” or “achieving” or “accomplishing”.

In fact, if we read Jesus’ words carefully,

fruitfulness is ***not so much something we DO as something we ARE.***

When we abide in Jesus, and stay close to Him,

When we rely upon the power of Jesus in our lives,

Then our values, priorities, desires, and dreams

All start to ***line up with the values of Jesus***, and the kingdom of God.

Isn’t that the way to true life?

And joy?

Could that be the joy that Jesus describes in this passage?

Pastor John Van de laar says that when we bear fruit:

We won’t have to strive to love....

we will automatically become lovers of God and people.

We won’t have to strive for justice –

we will automatically be concerned for the wellbeing of others and our planet.

We won’t have to pretend to be compassionate –

we will find compassion flowing freely....

Isn’t that what we all want as Christ-followers?

John van de laar, from Sacredise.com.

When Jesus spoke these words, he was talking to his disciples,

who were already feeling lost and cut down,

because Jesus had announced his departure and hard times to come.

So these are words for those of us who struggle today.

These are words for communities in challenging times.

They are words for those who need some new life---and hope---
the promise of Jesus' presence in our lives.

These are words for the single mom or dad struggling to make ends meet and provide a nurturing environment, while struggling with a profound ...loneliness. The kid who's been cyber bullied for so long just for being different that he or she is beginning to believe what the haters are saying.

The professional whose employment was terminated and, ... has no job prospects.

The recently and unexpectedly bereaved or devastated parent.

The caretaker who is losing a beloved spouse little by little to Alzheimer's.

Davidlose.net, April 24, 2018.

These are words of hope for all of us.

And these are words of CONNECTION.

Fruitfulness is connected to community.

Abiding is about community—***not just a personal relationship*** with Jesus.

One branch does not make a vine.

A vineyard is made up of ***countless branches and vines.***

So when Jesus shares these words of hope,

He is saying stay close to me, ***AND close to one another.***

Jesus is saying, ***community is not optional*** for my followers.

We think it is. Our society says it is.

We are Americans, who believe in independence and pulling ourselves up by our bootstraps.

But where has that gotten us?

By most accounts it has led to a state of isolation and loneliness.

Instead, we can choose to abide in Christ,
and in the body of Christ—the fellowship of other believers.

Community is key.

Jesus' words about community are like the African proverb that says:

Because we are, I am.

So as we receive this word of hope,

Let's ask ourselves,

Is our community abiding in Jesus Christ?

Are we ***staying close to the vine***, in our own lives, and as a church?

How is ***God working on us***, pruning, us?

What branches need to be ***cut off, or let go?***

And how are we *bearing fruit*?

Unfortunately, some take this *parable too literally*,

And see it as permission to judge others.

As if the branches are different kinds of people—and some need to be cut off or thrown away.

But this passage is *ultimately about life, and joy*—

and the branches are our *own hearts and minds*.

Our own churches.

And we all have branches within that need to be pruned,

habits and attitudes that keep us from loving Jesus and one another.

We all have parts of us that need to be shaped by God.

I was reading a pastor this week who talked about *pruning as shaping*—

and he used an image from Disney World,

and the shrubs that they prune and shape,

To look like Mickey Mouse, or Donald Duck!

Only when ***WE are pruned and shaped, it's to be like Jesus!***

Are we allowing God to make us more and more like Jesus?

We are so dependent upon the vine, the wisdom and power of Jesus.

Jesus said, ***'apart from me you can do nothing'***.

The question is: ***Do we believe that? Do we live that?***

Do we ***rely upon Jesus for everything***—our beliefs, our actions, our jobs, our ministry, our relationships, and our politics?

If not—how can we come closer to the Vine?

Abiding requires spending time with Jesus—are you doing that?

Are you spending time with him in prayer? Worship? The word?

Are you spending time with fellow believers?

We all need the gift of abiding in Him.

Friends, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches.

We are called to stay close to Him,

Where we will be shaped, pruned, and cleansed, all out of love—
so that we might bear fruit.

This is a promise of hope, and the Good News of the Gospel today.

And for this good news, all God's people can say together, Amen.