
John 15:1-8 The Message (MSG)

The Vine and the Branches

15 ¹⁻³ “I am the Real Vine and my Father is the Farmer. He cuts off every branch of me that doesn’t bear grapes. And every branch that is grape-bearing he prunes back so it will bear even more. You are already pruned back by the message I have spoken.

⁴ “Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can’t bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can’t bear fruit unless you are joined with me.

⁵⁻⁸ “I am the Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. Separated, you can’t produce a thing. Anyone who separates from me is deadwood, gathered up and thrown on the bonfire. But if you make yourselves at home with me and my words are at home in you, you can be sure that whatever you ask will be listened to and acted upon. This is how my Father shows who he is—when you produce grapes, when you mature as my disciples.

John 15:1-8

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed 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 my disciples.

“As **I** abide in **you**.”

That is the line in this week’s Gospel reading that helps me.



Without it, much of what Jesus says feels like a threat. Abide in me or else – be pruned, wither, be thrown into the fire, and die! All voiced as a threat to bully people into staying loyal and faithful.

But Jesus doesn't **just say** "Abide in me."

Rather, he clearly says (perhaps with a tone of affirmation), "Abide in me, **as I** abide in you." That changes everything.

The other statements about pruning and withering and the rest are not threats of intimidation but rather *statements of fact*, descriptions of what happens when we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from his love and acceptance, we run or hide or think we can do it on our own or decide to stand alone. Branches don't do that well when they are separated from the vine. At best they, like cut flowers, have a burst of color and bloom but then they fade and wither.

Jesus is preparing his disciples for his departure and wants to assure them of his presence, even when life gets hard (and it's about to get very hard).

The community for which John writes has likely been thrown out, rejected by friends and family, and feels alone and orphaned. They are feeling like they have been cut down, abandoned, broken off. John is offering a different frame of reference by which to reinterpret their experience. They are not being cut down but pruned. John is making a promise: Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go. These are important words for any person who feels cut down by circumstances or left alone in life.

- The single mom or dad struggling to make ends meet and provide a nurturing environment for the kids while struggling with a profound and entirely unexpected 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, despite the headlines saying the economy is at full employment, has no decent job prospects.
- The recently and unexpectedly bereaved and devastated parent.
- The caretaker who is losing a beloved spouse day by day, little by little to Alzheimer's.

You are not alone ... abide in Jesus, as he abides in you.

Jesus is with you, abiding you, *holding onto you*, loving you, and will not let you go. Which means that what feels like a death cut is mere pruning, that growth is ahead, that new life will come.



“Abide in me.” Alone, these words are, at best, good advice or encouragement and, at worst, a threat.

But, “Abide in me, as I abide in you....” These words are pure promise, gracious words of presence and providence. Words that need to be shared, whether shouted from the rooftops or whispered in a moment of tender and vulnerable stillness.

“Abide in me, as I abide in you.” Thank you for sharing Jesus’ promise, as your words will make more of a difference than you can imagine.

1. Gale O’Day suggests, “In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops, and another branch starts. All run together as they grow out of the central vine.” There is an absence of hierarchy in this vision of the church as branches of a vine because they all belong to the same vine and are tended by the same vine grower. Therefore, there is no status, everyone is equal, everyone is responsible for bearing fruit. The only condition is to love each other as Jesus loved us. We have lost sight of this basic idea in our highly structured church.

This Sunday’s image of how Christ abides in us is the image of the vine. Christ is the vine and we are the branches alive in each other, in the mystery of mutual abiding that we read of in the gospel and the first letter of John. Baptism makes us a part of Christ’s living and life-giving self and makes us alive with Christ’s life. As the vine brings food to the branches, Christ feeds us at his table. We are sent out to bear fruit for the life of the world.

God acts! In the frenzy of activities, God is the one who continually acts,

- giving life where there is death,
- opening hearts that are locked,
- bending that which is rigid.

God acts in baptism. We love one another because God first loved us. In the gospel, we can do nothing without Christ.

God acts in and through the community, through Hill Avenue Grace Lutheran. We are never left alone. And this action began in our baptism.

Praise in the faith community is expressed as love. God is love.

This is not an ephemeral love that exists somewhere in a spiritual communion between the believer and God. This love is real. When we experience God’s love,



we are moved to love our sister and our brother. It is a love that is perfected in the hard work of loving our neighbors and allowing our neighbors to love us. It is much easier to love God than it is to love a specific person next to me, whom God has sent. When God acts, it is in the messiness of life.

This love banishes fear. It banishes fear because again God is the one acting in love. If we rely on our own resources, we do not have the strength to welcome and love our neighbor, who can be very different from us. But the love that propels us is the same love that stepped into death, that remained faithful and freely gave of himself (propitiation again), who unlocked the doors of fear and opened the gates of praise. We have nothing to fear, because in all things God is acting. We are freed of the barriers we build around ourselves.

Our community is rooted in the one vine, Jesus Christ. This is the source of our love and our life. Without Christ, we can do nothing. This is a liberating discovery!

A footnote: those words from the Gospel of John (15:5) are the passage most often cited in the Lutheran confessional writings.

Perhaps the difficult part of this text is about the pruning. Gardeners know that pruning and weeding out what isn't growing leads to more growth and stronger growth. It seems cruel to cut away at a living thing, but in reality, pruning results in more production. How does that translate for us as followers of Christ?

We don't use "abide" much in our everyday language, but Jesus says we are to abide in him. To abide means to remain, stay, live, dwell, last, endure, or continue. To abide is different from having a one-night stay (or even a one-night stand). Christ calls us to have a very real relationship—an abiding, lasting relationship—with him. Abiding in the vine means there is a sense of stability, a rootedness, if you will. We become rooted or grounded in Christ and in God the vine grower. We know the source of our faithfulness, the source of our very lives as branches on that vine. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing."

These words of Jesus are words he spoke to his disciples not long before his death. Jesus needed to prepare his disciples for his own pruning, and for theirs. And after Jesus' death, John's community (and all the communities of Jesus' followers) needed to continue to feel that connection to Jesus, to have that ongoing relationship to Jesus and to God. What kept John's community together, for it to bear fruit, was an ongoing bond with and experience of the living Christ.

With "I am the vine" **we are invited into relationship** with Christ, into a deepening connection in which those who belong to him are both nourished by him and become part of his greater life in the world.



Here are some questions to consider about your life in the Christian faith:

1. What has been pruned out of your life in the last five years, and what new fruit has Jesus produced in your life during that time?
2. What in your life needs pruning right now? What is preventing Jesus from producing new fruit in your life today?
3. How do we go about bearing the “fruit of love” and knowing the “fullness of [God’s] joy”?

