

“A Communal Word”
John 15:1–8
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When I was growing up, I lived in the same town as my Groggie and Pap, my dad’s parents, and my brother and I spent many a Friday or Saturday spending the night with them. They had separate bedrooms, and James would sleep with Pap and I’d sleep across the hall with Groggie in their little two-bedroom house. As a result of living in the same town and our many “spend-the-night-parties,” I had a front-row seat to observe a relationship that was as deep as it was long.

Their shared gratitude was evident in their bowed heads and held hands at mealtimes. Their delight in being together was evident in the joy they found gardening together — Groggie with her roses and Pap with his vegetables — and the simple pleasure of sitting side by side on their little blue couch watching Lawrence Welk tap his baton to the ensuing big band music. Their shared devotion to God was evident in their every-Sunday presence as my pew companions while mom sang in the choir and dad ushered — and in their intentional devotion time each evening with their *Open Windows* and Bible in hand.

I remember one night after my family and I had finished supper, Dad got a phone call from Pap. He sensed an urgency in Pap’s voice, and Dad grabbed his keys and headed across town to their house, with ten-year-old me as his curious ride-along. As we pulled in the gravel drive, I could see my Pap standing in the doorway of the kitchen in his pajamas. When we got inside, my eighty-eight year old Pap looked earnestly at my dad and said, “Jimmy, I want to sleep beside Mattie one last time.”

Groggie’s room was small, so her bed was pushed up against one of the walls. She was already in bed, so Dad gently pulled her bed from the wall enough to give a wedge of space for him to assist Pap on the other side. And ever so slowly and carefully, Dad helped Pap and his arthritic

limbs stretch out on that low bed beside Groggie. With a hush that matched the moment, Dad pulled up the covers, cut out the lights, and guided me out the kitchen door.

When we got back into the car, dad looked at me through glassy eyes and said, “That, Lynn, is an abiding love.”

I imagine it was the first time I had heard the word ABIDE (or a form of it) in a context I could begin to understand — and I tucked that moment away, assuming that to abide had to have something to do with a deep and mutual devotion. A willingness to be vulnerable. A longing to be connected.

And in today’s gospel reading, we hear Jesus use that same word, ABIDE. Eight times in eight verses, in fact. It’s the word I gravitate towards when I read these verses – maybe because it makes me think of my dad’s comment that night in the car about Groggie and Pap. And maybe because I feel like it captures the essence of what Jesus is saying to us in these eight verses.

Our gospel lesson today is part of what’s known as The Farewell Discourse, and in its entirety it captures Jesus at his pastoral best as he prepares his disciples for his death, as he assures them of his enduring love, as he tells them of God’s spirit which will be with them always.

To set the scene of our specific passage today, Jesus has shared his final meal with his disciples in the upper room. Judas has left the table. Jesus has washed everyone’s feet. Peter has sworn that whatever happens, he’ll lay down his life for Jesus — even though we know by the next morning, he will have pretended not to even know Jesus.

So here Jesus sits in that upper room with his disciples, his closest friends who have left everything to follow him but are still grappling with who Jesus is (and who they are). They’re confused and perhaps growing more and more anxious the more Jesus’ words sink in, so Jesus takes this time to share some parting words to sustain them and bring them comfort. And in doing this, he offers the last of a series of self-identifying metaphors that he has peppered throughout his teaching in

John's gospel. In previous chapters, he has declared "I am... the bread of life; the light of the world, the gate for the sheep, the good shepherd, the resurrection and the life, way, the truth and the life."

Yet there's something different about his last I AM declaration we hear in today's scripture...

Jesus says, "I am the vine..." and immediately follows it with "you are the branches." It's the only I AM, YOU ARE sequence, as if to help the disciples understand their partnership in this soon-to-be new reality when Jesus is no longer with them. It's less absolute and more communal. Jesus is underscoring the responsibility his disciples have — and WE have. It points to a reciprocity and interdependence that I think helps to define what it is to abide.

We know branches can't live without being connected to the vine — we see that anytime we cut flowers from the yard and put them in a vase. But also, the vine doesn't produce the fulness of its fruit without the branches, does it? It's an image that captures not only our need to be connected to God, but of God's need for us to be real and genuine examples of God's spirit at work in us. We see this mutual need earlier in John in the relationship between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well. Undoubtedly, she needs him, the living water — but he needs her — first for a drink in the middle of a warm spring day, but then to be the one to bear witness to the people back in her village.

Jesus says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you." It's not a one-way venture where one side is doing all the giving and the other side is passively sitting back and soaking it all in — we know those kinds of relationships are doomed to fail. Rather, Jesus reaches out to us in grace and compassion, and God willing, we choose to reach back and find our lodging in him.

Beyond the message of reciprocity of need and interconnectedness, Jesus continues to teach through this imagery that the ultimate measure of interconnectedness with him is evidenced in the fruit that is born through this relationship. It's an important word for Jesus' disciples to hear because they're living within a culture where one's perceived piety

is based on strict adherence to the dos and don'ts of the Mosaic law. Jesus knows his disciples are in a precarious position. Their choice to believe in and follow Jesus has made them suspect in the eyes of the Pharisees and thus subject to being cast out. And to be cast out homeless, landless, family-less was the ultimate shame. This early group of Jesus-followers is struggling to redefine community, to find their place, to find what will root them in their newly found beliefs. And Jesus reminds them, before he leaves them, that their faithfulness is seen in the fruit they bear.

So what is this fruit that is so critical? Well... it's not spelled out for us in these eight verses but it's a great cliffhanger for next week's gospel reading! But the passage Myra read from 1 John a few moments ago gives us a really good hint: "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." We, then, are the conduits of God's love in the world. With Jesus as the vine, God as the vine-dresser, and us as the branches, God's love grows in us organically — not by force or by our own will but because the One who is the vine is true and the One who is the vine-dresser is good — and the fruit points others towards God's goodness, not our own.

It's an important reminder for us today — because we live in a society that promotes climbing the proverbial ladder and being self-made and sometimes that means self-centered. As a result, our self-worth can often become equated with our own successes — or failures — and we begin to value ourselves based on how productive we are or how much money we make or how many likes we get on social media. But Jesus' message is that we bear fruit not for our own benefit but for God's glory — so others can know of God's love and goodness and grace and joy through the way we live and love and treat and advocate for others.

Jesus' directive to abide, to remain, to take up residence with him and know deep down in our souls that we will be held in a love that knows no end doesn't come without risk or challenge, though. The imagery in this passage reminds us that on the vine, we'll be subject to pruning —

to examine the parts of our lives that aren't bringing joy and fulfillment and to spend time with God to discern why that may be. Some habits or thoughts or relationships may need to be trimmed away in order for us to fully thrive. And that's hard and emotionally painful and takes a lot of trust in the abiding love of God who holds us. Yet as we let go of those things that aren't bringing us life or drawing us closer to experiencing God's goodness, we are able to create space in our lives where new growth can happen. But that whole process of pruning and trimming reveals our vulnerabilities, doesn't it?

There's a perceived safety in keeping things the way they are, however dense and entangled they may be. Change that comes with trimming and pruning and self-examination is hard — whether it's for us as individuals, or for us as a church. It takes away what is known and comfortable and exposes our tender growing edges. I heard someone say recently on a podcast, "We try to impress people with our strengths but we actually connect through our vulnerability." And gosh, there's a lot of wisdom in that, isn't there?

If a central message of Jesus' imagery of vine and branches and abiding in him is about connection and reciprocity of need, then perhaps the pruning and trimming is not only to help us grow and yield more fruit but also to strengthen, in our vulnerable state, our connection with the one who, just hours later, will be stripped of everything and nailed to a cross.

Perhaps there are times when we feel stripped — when we know in our minds that God calls us to be fruit-bearing branches but we just don't feel it. It happens to the best of us.

Perhaps when that happens, we can recall this passage and the interconnectedness of what it means to abide in Jesus and he in us — and extend that metaphor to this larger community. We do this thing called faith together. I have yet to see a vineyard with only one little plant; rather there are rows and rows of them, with buckets full of fruit that are smashed together to create generous and gracious end results.

Collectively, we're growing together in Christ, supporting one another, affirming the fruits we see growing in one another, pointing each other to God's goodness and grace and bridging the gap for one another as we strive to be more and more connected to the One who gives us life. I hope that's the image we see when we're gathered together. I hope it's the image that is seen anytime, anywhere communities of faith gather.

I'm still learning what it means to fully abide in Christ ... maybe you feel that way too... But *surely* it has something to do with a deep and mutual devotion with God. A willingness to be vulnerable and expose our growing edges. A longing to be connected to God and others. Surely it's a place of being where love abounds.



Benediction:

As you go, may God the vine-grower tend you and make you fruitful;
May Christ Jesus abide in you and give you life;
And may the Holy Spirit remind you of God's love that is with you
always.
Go in peace.