

Fifth Sunday of Easter April 28, 2024

1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

One thing I do not have is a green thumb. I have always been fascinated by the natural world- I would watch *Nature* and *Nova* on PBS growing up. I was out and about in nature enough to see how plants grow and mature. To look up close at the process of new growth beginning. How that new growth related to the older growth. But the reality is that I am a maintainer, not a grower when it comes to the landscape and garden.

Last week we had a pastoral image for who Jesus is for us. Jesus as the Good Shepherd. Who knows us and we know him. Who will lay down his life for our safety. Who guides us to green pastures and still waters.

This week, we have a more agricultural image. Jesus as the true vine. We as the branches. Producing fruit that brings new life to others.

As one of our members on Wednesday pointed out this is a more intimate image. A more granular and in-depth connection between us and Jesus than that of a shepherd and their sheep. Even the good shepherd!

Have you ever seen a grapevine and its branches. Here is an image. The vine is the thick and ropey looking thing coming up and then spreading out across the supports. The branches are green, young, and have the grapes coming off them.

The vine, as one author put it, “exists to nourish, feed, and grow the branches.” It is the means for nutrients and water to come up from the roots, enter the

branches and that produces the fruit. So, without the vine, the branches produce nothing.

As branches, Jesus calls us to abide in him. Abide (meno in the Greek)- remain, dwell, stay, hang with, all of these are ways of describing that word. But to expand the vine and branch imagery, it means to be so intertwined with the vine you cannot tell where one ends and the other begins. It means being connected with Jesus on a cellular level. It means being rooted in one place (not necessarily a geographic one), one person.

This can be a challenging thing in this day and age. When it is so easy to abide in other things. A recent report shows that since 2020, average screen time for American adults has increased 60%. One report shows that US internet users spend 7 hours a day online. Kids 8-10 spend about 6 hours a day in front of a screen mostly using entertainment media. Children 11-14 spend nine hours a day in front of a screen. The recommendation is no more than 2 hours. I freely admit that this is a problem for me as well, even as some of my happiest times are outside or working in my shop.

Too often we abide, connect ourselves intimately with other things, and like the parable of the sower it chokes out the Word and so that Word yields nothing in us. A recent Gallup Poll shows that weekly worship attendance has fallen to 30% of Americans. This is down from 42% two decades ago. Most of that decline is not because of any great conflict or pain, but because people moved and didn't find a new church or that it was just too inconvenient. While worship is not the only place or way to connect to Jesus, it certainly is the primary one. When we do not regularly abide with Jesus here, then when are we really doing that?

Jesus warns that if we do not abide in him, if we attach ourselves to something other than the true vine. If we cut ourselves off from the true vine. Then by definition we will die. For we will not receive the nutrients and the water that we need to live. Not truly live.

It's an image that makes me wonder about the increases in anxiety and depression in our youth and young adults. Sociologist and author Jonathan Haidt certainly links it to the screens and posits that it is something more organic that they are missing. The messy but (he would argue) essential task of learning how to be in relationship with one another. Of connecting with the real world, not the digital one.

Abiding in these screens and some of the other trappings of modern life does lead to life- but is it really fuller and more abundant than the life that abides in God's love come to us in Jesus Christ?

When we abide, hang with, dwell in, are intimately connected with Jesus then we can produce fruit. Abundantly.

And what is the fruit we produce when we abide with Jesus? Well, this is John's gospel, what do you think it is? Go back to Maundy Thursday and the last command in John that Jesus gives the disciples. Yep. That fruit is love.

Love, as first John reminds us, casts out all fear. Love is from God. Love is God- come to us in Jesus so that we might live through him. First John says this is how we know that we abide in God when we confess Jesus is the Son of God. When we confess that Jesus is God's love come to us

Here again we have an image that connects us intimately with Jesus. Not just bathing in his love but being attached to him in a way that feeds our very lives.

It is a wonderful picture of a community as well. The last two verses refer to us as a community. “If ya’ll abide in me, and my words abide in ya’ll, ask for whatever ya’ll resolve, and it will be done for ya’ll. My Father is glorified by this, that ya’ll bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

In this image, Jesus illustrates how vital he is to our very life. That our purpose is to receive the love of God come to us in Jesus. To abide in him. To be so intimately connected to Christ that there is no daylight between us. He also illustrates the second part of our purpose- sharing that love with others as we bear the fruit of the vine to which we are attached.

I was speaking with my UD students the other day and part of the argument I made was that Jesus did not give a lot of commands about specific things. What to do when someone calls you a name and pushes you, how to react to this particular event in the news. Instead, he gave us broad strokes to guide our specific actions. “Love one another. In the same way I have loved you, love one another.”

Okay, someone in our community is suffering, grieving, hurting. What does it mean to love them in the same way Jesus loved us? What do you think? Okay. And how do we know this? Because we abide with Jesus. We know him because we are around him.

Does loving someone the way Jesus loves us mean there are not boundaries? No rules for living? No! But what does that mean for the way in which we place boundaries and rules on us and those around us? This is parenting 101 here.

And the way we know these things is because we have so attached ourselves to Jesus- through the Word that is scripture, through bathing in him in worship, conversing with him in prayer- that we know his ways and so can bear his fruit. We know these things because we are surrounded by a community of branches united as one in Christ who is our vine. A community that supports, encourages, corrects and guides us as we seek to bear that fruit of sharing God's love come to us in Jesus.

I asked the question of our Wednesday crowd as to which of these two images spoke more fully to them. So I'll do it here, too. Which do you connect more with. The image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd? Or the image of Jesus as the True Vine?

And this is part of the gift of the church, that even though a particular one speaks to us more, we understand that each is a valid and helpful understanding of who Jesus is in relationship to us and to God. None is more "right" than another, but both begin to give us a sense of the fullness of who God in Jesus is.

We gather today to abide in the True Vine, to dwell with him and in relationship with one another. To receive his love come to us in the waters of baptism that claim us, to be fed by his Word in scripture, song, and sermon, and in his body and blood that comes to us in this Meal. To glory in the intimacy of that relationship with Jesus.

So that we might then go and bear the fruit of that love for others in this world. Those who need to hear Jesus' unconditional, "I love you." In speech and in action. Both individually and (as we will do in the Ely Community Food Drive next week) as the ya'll that is the church.

What a wondrous image to have set before us in the height of the blossoming of nature that is Spring. Let us give thanks to God for that new life, and for the new life we have when we abide in God's love come to us in Jesus Christ.