

Oak Grove Presbyterian Church

Rev. Mary Koon

August 7, 2022

John 15:1–8

Our text today is Jesus' final "I am" statement in John's gospel – I am the vine. Perfect for communion Sunday, don't you think?

Like last week's "I am" statement, these words are part of Jesus' farewell discourse – the conversation he had with those closest to his heart at the Last Supper on the night he was arrested. Jesus is tender with them, washing their feet, giving them the command to love, to do as he did. Jesus talks about sending the Holy Spirit...all these words meant to comfort, inspire and prepare them for what lies ahead. And then Jesus says this...

John 15:1-8

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

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.

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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. AMEN

There may not be grape vines on every corner these days, but vineyards were all over the place in Israel. Vineyard symbolism was used often in the Judaism of Jesus' time and is found in Jewish scripture. The vineyard, as a metaphor for God's people, was a common figure of speech in Israelite poetry. It conveyed ideas about divine love and divine judgement. Isaiah 5 is a song about the vineyard that produces bad fruit, a metaphor for the failure of God's people to live with justice and compassion.

And in the apocryphal book of Sirach, wisdom compares herself to a vine, "Like the vine I bud forth delights, and my blossoms become glorious and abundant fruit." Wisdom has rich rewards. (Sirach 24:17).

Vine talk was also important in the gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke.

Here, Jesus reshapes the familiar vineyard symbolism. The vine grower is still God, but Jesus lets us know that he is the true vine, ushering in a new way of living, of what it means to be people of faith. This new way speaks to the relationality of God, Christ, the community, the earth. The relationality of faith. This new way of life is symbolized in the bread and wine Jesus consecrates after that dinner.

Have you ever tried to pull up a vine from the ground? It doesn't come up easily; trunk, vine and root wind intricately together – branches are almost indistinguishable from one another. On a walk in Duluth in July, Jim and I saw a vine growing on a fence. I tried to follow a vine, but it was hard to know where one branch stopped and another one started.

Jesus gives us a word picture of lives wound around one another, nourished by the vine, tended by God, for the express purpose of

serving, doing justice and mercy. The image is of a community of persons operating without hierarchy, mutually dependent upon one another. Different gifts and abilities, all at work. No one is alone, no one is left out. No one is more important than another. All are thriving, all are responsible to bear fruit, with the only condition being to love one another.

Jesus' words release us from the burden of thinking that we are isolated in our humanness. Together, we form one another's identity.

This describes the African philosophy of Ubuntu – “I am because we are.” Bart talked about it last Sunday.

Archbishop Desmond Tutu explains it this way:

“The first law of our being is that we are set in a delicate network of interdependence with our fellow human beings and with the rest of God's creation. In Africa recognition of our interdependence is called ubuntu. It is the essence of being human. It speaks of the fact that my humanity is caught up and inextricably bound up in yours. I am human because I belong. A person with ubuntu is welcoming, hospitable, warm and generous, willing to share. Such people are open and available to others, willing to be vulnerable, affirming of others, do not feel threatened when others are able and good, for they have a proper self-assurance that comes from knowing that they belong in a greater whole.” (Desmond Tutu, *God Has a Dream*, 25-26.)

Ubuntu happens as we recognize our interrelatedness with the divine, other humans, creatures, and the earth. Our liberation is shared, or it isn't liberation at all.

Staying connected is key – abiding is how we grow into our “proper self-assurance” that Tutu mentions.

In these eight verses, the word “abide” appears 8 times. Abide is to dwell...with an implication of being at home, living in love. And even here, the language of abiding is that of mutuality. Jesus doesn’t say, “Abide in me and I’ll watch over you.” He says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” Abide in me, abide in you...sounds like ubuntu. In healthy, mutual relationships, there is give and take. Listening and talking, mindfulness, stillness and action, learning from one another. Abiding takes practice.

It’s tough to abide when we don’t pay attention to what’s around us, minds set on our own agendas, which may be good, yet too busy to think, reflect, pray, to listen to voices not our own. We do not abide when we fear those who are different, or isolate ourselves. Yet, as we abide in Christ, through intentional community, accountability, disciplined times for stillness, prayer, and connection, we tap into the ultimate source of energy and hope.

Our passage, which started with the vine tended by the vine-grower God, comes to a close with the beautiful, intersected vines bearing much fruit, glorifying the gardener God. Verses about bearing fruit appear six times in this text. While abiding is a source of comfort, solace and strength, there is an implication of action as well. Bearing fruit is our discipleship, our physical discipleship of being Christ’s hands and feet in the world.

Now I want to look for a moment at the verses in this text that I find troubling...the ones where Jesus talks about God’s pruning...lopping off the branches that bear no fruit. In light of who we know Jesus to be, his life and ministry, and in light of the truth of the interconnectedness he himself talks about, we are invited to look at this as a statement of truth rather than a warning.

Fruit bearing indicates life. That which isn't alive, disconnected to the root, withers. Pruning is necessary for plants, and for our spiritual lives as well. Those things that are no longer life-giving must go, even when they seem to be working for us, as they may hurt others. God is always reforming the church – think about the evolution of ordination to include women and people in the LGBTQIA population. Or our emphasis on eco-justice that continues to emerge. As a denomination, we now wrestle our history of white supremacy and are learning what it means to be anti-racist.

Pruning doesn't feel good – learning about and acknowledging the ways we, as individuals, as a church, a denomination, have missed the mark can be tender and bruising. Growing pains are real and necessary – part of life on the vine.

But in our living, in the pruning, in the growing, flowering and fruiting, there is grace upon grace. The promise of Christ's presence and companionship, the wonder of our interconnectedness with earth and the divine can inspire, hold us accountable, lift us up when we feel lost or alone, for we abide in the one who created us and loves us forever.

I want to make a three dimensional, living vine right here, right now, to remind us that Jesus is the true vine. To put some flesh on these words of scripture.

I want all of us to link up, place a hand on your neighbor's shoulder. No need to get super close. Those closest to the aisles will need to step closer to the people across the aisles, and maybe the ends can place a hand on the shoulder of the person in front of you. We begin by someone placing a hand on the baptismal font symbolizing abiding in Christ. I invite you to stand up and I'll begin reading. Are you ready?

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Thanks be to God. AMEN

Sources

O'Day, Gail R. "The Gospel of John" in *The New Interpreter's Bible, volume IX*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995.

Tutu, Desmond with Abrams, Douglas. *God Has a Dream*. New York: Doubleday, 2004.