

The True Vine
John 15:1-8
April 28, 2024
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Anyone else feeling rather pruned of late? Don't get me wrong. I have much to be grateful for: family, friends, colleagues, and this congregation. And yet...

And yet wars rage on in Gaza and Ukraine, another election season is moving into full swing (and aren't we all excited about that!), and Madison just experienced one of the warmest winters on record. Friday's *New York Times* reported that after Covid ruined high school graduation for the class of 2020, the response to campus protests this month might upend their college commencements. You know, some days it's hard to read the newspaper, or watch the news.

And that's the thing. At any given moment, even when things are going relatively well, there are still so many difficult things with which to contend in this life and it often feels like being pruned.

Or maybe it just feels like being cut, cut down by life's tragedies great or small, cut down by disappointment or despair, cut down by illness or job loss or other circumstances beyond our control. And you end up cut off, withered, useless, like the branches and scraps we clean up from our yard and haul away or burn. If you've ever seen pruned bushes, you know it's not a pretty picture.

Sometimes, in fact, a pruned bush looks so ravaged that it's hard to believe it will ever bear fruit or flower again. But cutting away the dead growth - whether from a single plant or from the whole garden - is the only way for new life to take place.

Some of the language in our text from John this morning is hard to hear - cutting, pruning, being thrown into the fire, etc. To be honest, though, this is less intended as a threat about what happens if you don't abide in Jesus but more a metaphorical description of what actually happens when you are not connected to the source of life.

Jesus is offering these words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He knows what is going to happen - both to himself and to his flock - and they do not. They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting but that they will survive, even flourish and bear fruit.

No doubt that was hard to believe, as there was precious little evidence available to the disciples that they had not been abandoned. And no doubt it still is hard to believe on our end as well, as so much of life simply tears at us with no evidence that it is moving toward some more fruitful future.

But amid this uncertainty and distress, Jesus still invites us - actually, not just invites but *promises* us - that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us like a vine clings to a tree so that we endure, persevere, and even flourish among the challenges of life.

The question raised by this text isn't, finally, whether you'll experience some difficulty, some cutting. The question is whether that pruning will be toward new growth or will be just the beginning of more withering. And the answer seems to be tied to Jesus' words, "Abide in me as I abide in you," he told his disciples just one day before his death. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

Abide. It's an old-fashioned word we don't use much. Highway motel signs read "Stay here," not "Abide with us tonight. Baseball announcers don't sum up an inning with "One hit, a

walk and two abiding on base." Nor do UW football fans breathe easier because Luke Fickell is abiding with the team as its head coach. Of the seventeen uses of abide listed in the Oxford dictionary, eight are obsolete. The word seems to belong to another time.

"To abide" has to do with persevering, continuing, lasting, staying with it. No wonder the term is rare. What it means is rare, in this or any time.

Its absence diminishes us. Friendships break off. So do treaties between nations. Business contracts become tissue thin. Marriage covenants, often begun at weddings where this passage from John is heard, are broken in divorce. God alone knows the river of tears and dysfunction set in motion by the absence of abiding in marriage, the foundation of human community.

Abiding takes its strength from Christ the true vine. After Easter morning, abiding rests on belonging—he in us and we in him. Everything changes when abiding is not an abstract ideal but a response to his offer. Abide in me as I abide in you. First his grace, then our commitment.

It is the ongoing Easter miracle that Jesus works us into the astonishing new creation ushered in by the raising of God's Son. He abides, lasts, endures, continues, hangs in, holds on, to us and in us. He does so despite our frequent forgetting that we have been baptized, engrafted into his life.

Abide is a where word. We abide where the Lord gathers us, even two or three of us, in his name. More than most of us realize that the powerful currents of contemporary life, especially those that turn the grace of Christ into one more consumer item, make resilient commitment to him and each other an ever-tougher call.

Abide is also a when word. It includes times when the presence of the indwelling Christ is known in the wondrous fullness of deep-down joy. That can range from the Hallelujah chorus of Handel's Messiah to the hands-raised "Hallelujah" of a storefront revival, from the embrace of reconciled enemies to the Creator's handiwork in the spectacular beauty of Spring.

There are moments when abiding is sustained through times of numbing grief. During the Christmas holiday last year, I read about a young man who was lost in Alaska during a terrible blizzard. His parents made the long trip to Barrow, America's northernmost town, searched in vain for his body, discovered the shelter that would have saved him, experienced the high of the three-hour funeral service and the low of leaving with wrenching questions left unanswered. They were bone-weary within and without as they started home.

During a midnight layover in the Seattle airport, they saw a couple just arriving from China with two newly adopted infant girls. Despite their exhaustion, they offered words of welcome and good wishes to the couple, seeing in the arrival of those infants a sign of what they could see only by a faith that outlasts heartache: their son's arrival into that life prepared by the Easter Lord. Such faithful seeing comes from faithful abiding.

How well are we abiding as a congregation? How well are we connected to Christ and to each other? One of the great ironies of modern life is that we're now more connected than ever, yet also feel increasingly isolated. We have more and more friends on Facebook, but fewer friends that we actually see and talk with in person. We are "linked in" all over the place, yet rates of reported loneliness and depression are skyrocketing. We are connected to more sources of news, information, and entertainment and even to each other via email and social media yet seem to be almost drowning in information while simultaneously starved for actual experience, particularly the experience of being in real relationship.

I think that's what Jesus offers his disciples here. Not simply connection - that's not enough to nourish life - but relationship, community, life in its abundance.

One of our challenges right now at Westminster is finding ways to connect our in-person congregation with our virtual congregation on Sunday morning and throughout the week. Our worship committee is reading a fascinating book right now called *The Holy and Hybrid: Navigating the Church's Digital Reformation*. How can we abide with one another and with Christ when half our congregation is worshipping on-line? How can we better foster relationships and community in this digital age? It's a challenge we need to address because the digital congregation is here to stay.

But let's not kid ourselves - being in genuine relationship and real community isn't easy. We tend to romanticize these things, especially when we're feeling lonely. But relationships have ups and downs, give, and take. We have to be vulnerable in relationships to make them work, which means that we can never completely protect ourselves from being hurt.

The same is true with the community. Communities, we tend to forget, are made up of real people, some nicer, some not, but all of us have our days and tend to act like jerks from time to time. And being in community means dealing with that, sometimes running into someone who's being a jerk and at other times recognizing when we're the ones being the jerk. And then working it out, abiding with one another. No, relationships and community aren't easy.

Part of what Jesus is saying to us in this text is that by being connected to him we are also able - even free - to be connected with each other. Because finally what Jesus invites us to do is to be real, to be honest about who and what we are, even if that means admitting our tendency to flee the spotlight and hide in the darkness because we are afraid.

Jesus invites us to be honest, to be real, and having confessed our hopes and fears, our dreams and disappointments, our accomplishments and failures, our blessings, and our sin, to know that we are accepted, loved, and forgiven.

In light of God's acceptance of us, only then can we then turn and try to accept and abide with each other, living with the imperfections of even our best relationships and communities because we know ourselves to be imperfect and flawed and yet also loved.

So, can we be a congregation that becomes a place where we admit who we are and allow others to do the same? Can we be a place where the hurts and hardships of life - because they are borne together - are more like pruning for future growth rather than the cutting, binding, and burning that we are all too familiar with?

In this digital age it is the one precious gift we have to offer to a virtual world: real community. "Abide in me," Jesus says to his disciples today, "as I abide in you."

Amen.