

The Church of the Pilgrimage
Rev. Dr. Helen Nablo
April 29, 2018

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Abiding

Perhaps, like me, you took interest in the article in this week's Boston Globe about a professor and her college course on happiness. "Happiness 101" the headline read. "Course Description: Life Advice for Overachievers". Though technically the class is Psych 157, and titled "Psychology and the Good Life" everyone at Yale University refers to it as "the happiness class". It is a pretty popular class – some 1200 students enrolled when the course was unveiled this semester.

The article shared how Professor Laurie Santos, whose research had originally been in how nonhuman primates interact – switched her research to undergrad happiness when she and her husband moved into one of the colleges dorms, effectively becoming dorm counselor, dorm den mother and daily observer of the stress of the student population. In her course, which meets twice a week, she blends traditional psychology with something of a self-help seminar, offering "Psych pro tips" and "rewirement requirements", assignments for breaking bad habits and creating new ones.

Santos most talked about assignment came earlier this semester when she taught the students about "time affluence" – the opposite of their usual "time famine" – by surprising them one week with the news that next class meeting there would be no class. The students were ordered to use the unexpected free time creatively. No work. No studying. Put down your phone. Do something together. "Two students in front of me just started crying" she said.

The students went to museums they'd never entered. They made new friends. Then a snowstorm (imagine that this year?) helped out and extended the assignment. With school cancelled for the following day, many of the students stayed together all through the night.

“We know from psychology that the top key to happiness has to do with intentional social interactions” Santos said. “Very happy people spend time with other people” (Boston Globe, Thursday, April 26, 2018)

The mention of those young women bursting into tears like that brought me back to a moment in worship many years ago, at another church. It was the prayer time, the sharing of celebrations and concerns time, when a young girl who was about 10 or 11 raised her hand. “I would like us to pray for grown ups who are too busy. Who never have time to slow down.”

Which leads to Jesus words to his disciples, our passage today. Jesus wasn’t speaking to modern day realities – to overachieving college students, to stressed out working parents, to newly retired people seeking new balance and new meaning. Jesus was speaking to his disciples, and in a critical moment, this time before his crucifixion. He would be leaving them, and there were things he wanted them to know. And just as the disciples would struggle to understand their purpose after Jesus departure, these words were also for a community, the community John was writing for. They were in a precarious situation – their choice to believe in Jesus and to follow him made them suspect in the eyes of the established religious authorities and therefore subject to excommunication and persecution.

In this context, Jesus speaks a comforting picture. It’s of a vine, and branches, and God who is the vineyard gardener. God is in control as vinegrower; the vine and the fruit of the vine are gifts from God. (*Feasting on the Word*, Barbara Essex, Year B, volume 2, p. 475) “*Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.*” The advice, the counsel, the encouragement in a time of threat or trial is to stay connected. To seek to be like Jesus, who as Madeline L’Engle says, “was never separated from the Source”.

Abide in me. That’s like saying dwell in me – be at one with me, be at home with me. Abide is such a lovely old-fashioned word. As Eugene Peterson translates it Jesus says “Live in me. Make your home in me, just as I do in you.”

Some of us know the old hymn:

*Abide with me, fast falls the evening tide:
The darkness deepens: Lord with me abide!
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.*

It’s an old timey hymn, often sung at evening services and at funerals actually. We pray for God to be with us as we turn to sleep, as we say goodbye to loved ones, as we find ourselves in need of help.

But here in Jesus words the direction is switched. It is not us appealing for God to abide with us. In the scripture the encouragement, the invitation is from Jesus to us – *Jesus invites us to abide with him.* It is gentle, tender encouragement, and so needed for our day.

Abide is not hurried. It is not about what you produce, what you accomplish, who is noticing you or acclaiming you any of those external things. Abiding is a spiritual word, a Christian ethic -- and a counter cultural way of being.

I once knew a person who said they woke up every morning and said out loud "God let me be a part of what you are doing today." That is in the spirit of abiding. Connection. Not control.

Have you ever felt truly torn up inside, or simply flat and lifeless? Someone offering to be with you, to sit with you, listen to you Abide with you can make all the difference in the world! That quality of abiding with another can be what leads to new vision, new perspective, and new hope.

This passage after all, is about *growth*. Again, from Eugene Peterson, *The Message*: "*I am the vine, and 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.*" (Eugene Peterson, *The Message*)

This week on Tuesday morning I drove to Sandwich UCC Church to join other clergy colleagues for a day of covenant. Held from time to time, in various locations throughout our conference, this brought together about 35 Massachusetts clergy for a day, a morning really, of reflection. We began with a little "speed dating" type exercise, where you moved around a circle and face to face with a new person answered the next question. What year in your life would you love to live again? What's been your big learning in life these last few years? You had about a minute to talk really fast, each time with someone new, and it was kind of fun.

But then we moved into a slower pace. We found a partner and stood facing that person, hands raised, as in blessing. Jim Antal, President of the Massachusetts Conference, and Don Remick, our Area Conference Minister, took turns reading out the ordination vows we all took as member clergy of the UCC, as we repeated them together. Here are just a few:

- "I renew my covenant to be diligent in my private prayers and in reading the scriptures, as well as the public duties of my office."

- "I renew my covenant to be zealous in maintaining the truth of the gospel and the peace of the church, speaking the truth in love."

- "I renew my covenant to be faithful in preaching and teaching the gospel, in administering the sacraments and rites of the church, and in exercising pastoral care and leadership."

- "I renew my covenant to honor all confidences shared with me."

After that, we said a prayer of confession for the ways we have fallen short, sang a song that served as an assurance of grace, and then, with that as our starting point, moved into a conversation about the joys and challenges of being in ministry today.

The whole idea with this day was for us to slow down a bit so there is time to reflect upon what we are doing, and why we are doing it. It was helpful. A minister who doesn't take time to nourish his or her spirit is like a painter who never cleans her brushes, or a woodcarver who never sharpens his tools. I am quite sure there wasn't a pastor in the room that didn't have times of feeling disconnected, or harried, or torn in a million different directions, parish ministry being like that sometimes – "nibbled to death by ducks" is what we often say. A day like this day of covenant does what I think worship is meant to do: reconnect us to the proper Source of Life, so we can indeed be nourished and be fruitful ourselves.

So, what about the pruning part of this scripture? In Bible Study we wondered if Jesus was saying the vine grower will prune away the difficult members of the church...but then that could be problematic, because who among us isn't difficult at one time or another, so you know...maybe we hope that isn't the kind of pruning Jesus is talking about. So we looked more at what we knew about gardening. Someone reminded us that certain plants need to be deadheaded if they are to produce new growth. If you don't remove the spent flower, the plant spends all its energy going there, trying to make something dead grow. Not only can this be like the church, it can be like each of us.

In our emotional and spiritual lives – where is our energy going? Are we feeding that which is actually already dead, or that which only adds stress, or drains energy from our lives? Is God trying to prompt a spiritual pruning in us, a giving up or a letting go of attitudes, or even in some cases goals or ambitions that may not be serving us well anymore? I noticed, in bible study, that many of us got quiet as we thought for a bit on what in us might warrant a good pruning.

Though I want to stay with this wonderful metaphor Vine, branches, pruning, fruitfulness I also want to share with you that at our day of covenant, the discussion among clergy had a note of distress to it. There was a sense that in churches today people seem to want – no, in many cases *demand* that church be a tension free zone – preachers these days are regularly hearing concerns about anything sounding political, though the gospel itself may be political, and there is an expectation that people are supposed to think the same about everything, which of course - people being people -- they don't. We wondered, some of us, if we need to remind others remind ourselves that a little creative tension often leads to true fruitfulness, that as the church works together to resolve tension in a way that considers the needs of the whole, and in a way that reflects the gospel, we grow, and our community grows.

Truth is, we abide in the vine of Jesus, and we have to remember others do too.

Abide is a *communal thing*. I wonder when things get tense in church, if we might all take a deep breath and say to ourselves, this other person is on the vine, they are seeking to find life in Jesus, just as I am. I wonder if that might change things. To abide with another, or with a group of others, *asks something of us*. This makes being part of a faith community decidedly different than being part of a stamp club, or a remote-control sailing group, or even a community action group. In those groups, people are bound by one clearly defined common interest— the hobby or interest or concern. In the church, we are bound by something else: abiding in Jesus, abiding in his love and grace, his call and purposes in this world and abiding in one another. And that has times when it is a lot harder than comparing stamps, or sailing boats, or even sorting out ideas about how to press forward to make change.

Many of you say you like hearing, pretty much every Sunday “Whoever you are, and wherever you are on life’s journey, you are welcome here.” It sounds to you like acceptance. It sounds to you like you don’t have to have your act together to be at home here. It sounds like the extravagant welcome of Jesus that we *all* need to hear. Yet just as the ordination vow holds together “the truth of the gospel” and “the peace of the church”, and just as those two things can be in tension sometimes, so too the church is by its very nature going to be a place of tension from time to time. I think of Anne Lamott’s expression “God loves you just the way you are, But God loves you too much to let you stay there.”

Abiding isn’t static, because there is this vine - a growing thing. So we don’t set up camp with Jesus and expect to remain unchanged. We don’t demand the church stay unchanged. It simply can’t, the joys and challenges of life being ever changing, and the world in which we live being ever changing and the gospel being largely about transformation.

In this vine and branches metaphor of Jesus, we are given both a vision and a hope about our very being. It is a vision earthy and organic *intimate* and alive, a gift to you and to me, and to the church of Jesus Christ.

May we abide in him and may we be fruitful for him.

Amen.