

Connected in Community
John 15:1-17
October 4, 2015

Purpose: To inspire the congregation to recognize how we are called and chosen to be part of the vine and the role and gift of being connected to each other (the church).

The past three Sundays we have been dwelling with the theme of *Fanning the Flames* as we have looked at the ways God equips us all with gifts and invites us to freely use them for the furthering of God's kingdom. Last week Pastor Neil challenged us to consider the ways we have all been called to join in the ministry as we voluntarily accepted the waters of baptism.

Liz just read for us the familiar text of the vine and the branches which is part of Jesus' farewell address to his disciples. Now, if it had been you, what would you say in your farewell speech? What would you tell your followers? What would be the central tenets that you would want to rehearse *just one more time*? What would you want to emphasize for them to remember? It is important for us to keep reminding ourselves that the context of this passage is in fact part of Jesus' farewell speech. As Jesus is preparing his disciples for his absence he does take the opportunity to rehearse with them one more time who he is, what his relationship to God is like, what their relationships with him are to be like, and what their relationships with each other should look like. In many ways this passage in chapter fifteen sums up what John has been working to communicate throughout his entire Gospel - our relationships with Jesus and with each other are what should define us and keep us rooted and connected. John accomplishes this task by the repetitive use throughout the gospel of the Greek word "meno" which is often translated as abide or remain.

Now before we get ahead of ourselves, let me pause and ask you - what is the church? Where is the church, or who is the church? Or what *does* or should the church do? But even deeper than that, why is there the church? How do you abide with Jesus? What prohibits you

from abiding with Jesus? How does abiding with Jesus refuel you so that you can keep using the gifts God has equipped you with? Beneath all these questions comes the belief and trust that our relationship with Jesus, and our relationships with each other matter. The answers deal with the notion and practice of community which flies in the face of the individualistic society in which we find ourselves today. Furthermore the directions Jesus provides challenges us to relearn a familiar word, and yet a word that most of us probably do not do well – abide.

As I mentioned earlier this Greek word “meno” is the mantra of John’s entire Gospel message. To highlight that I would name that John uses this Greek verb forty times in this Gospel. Now, that might not seem noteworthy until I share with you that this same Greek verb shows up only twelve times in Matthew, Mark and Luke *combined*, and only thirty-nine times in all the New Testament books combined.ⁱ John’s “model relationship for Jesus and his disciples is that of staying or remaining together... the imagery unites Jesus to his disciples inseparably. If separated, the disciples will no longer be disciples.”ⁱⁱ Willard Swartley reminds us that “Abide is not a common word these. It is rather out of style... In our fast-paced computer culture, we do not know what abide means. We stay with other people only for a short time (and I would add even when we are with people we are often distracted by our technology devices so even then we are not able to truly abide with people we are physically present with!). Friendships that abide are hard to come by. If they abide, they require commitment and nurturing. That is the direction Jesus takes his disciples in this lengthy discourse. Jesus teaches them to live in communion with himⁱⁱⁱ (and with each other).

Here in John chapter fifteen we read part of Jesus’ farewell speech as he describes these relationships in terms of a vine and its branches. This imagery would have been extremely familiar to his disciples. During these days the people would have relied heavily upon the

vineyards in their daily lives. Furthermore as part of the people of God this would not have been their first time hearing something discussed in terms of a vine as throughout the Old Testament we will find the imagery of the vine employed. But yet our text today is strikingly different. For here the vine is not symbolic of Israel, but instead verse one tells us that Jesus is proclaiming that he is not only the vine, but the **true** vine. “That Jesus refers to the *true* vine infers rival vines... “Seeing Jesus as the true Vine... contrasts with whatever else claims to be the Vine.””^{iv}

Once Jesus has established that he is the true vine he states that his Father is the gardener. The Greek word literally means farmer or cultivator, one who grows, nurtures, or encourages growth. I believe that by Jesus calling God the gardener we should be filled with hope because who else could have greater skill in nurturing our growth and nurturing our gifts? It is God who tends to the vine, and it is God who cuts off the branches that are not bearing fruit and it is God who prunes the branches that are bearing fruit so that they can be even more fruitful.

In verse five Jesus states that he is the vine and we are the braches and to bear fruit we must remain or abide in him, because apart from him we can do nothing. One way to respond is to remain in Jesus. In this short passage Jesus tells us to remain in him over ten different times. Remain in can also be translated abide in, dwell in. It gives the sense of inhabiting something. Jesus did not say to us the branches, come and visit him, perhaps stay awhile, or write him a letter or email or better yet to send a text, or stop in for a cup of tea, but he said **repeatedly** abide in me. This is for the long haul; to view Jesus not as our hotel but as our permanent residence. To abide in Jesus means that we are not abiding somewhere else or not trying to use something or someone else to refuel us, to give us life, to rejuvenate us. **Abiding in Jesus means that we allow our relationship with Jesus to be primary in our lives, and to be the relationship above others that tells us who we you, and where we belong.**

If we return to the imagery of the vine and the branches it is easy to articulate the necessity of being attached to the vine. We all know that once the branch is cut off the life source is also cut off and the branch **will** wither and die, it's just a matter of time. We must be connected to the vine to receive life and what we need. Furthermore Jesus reiterates that we cannot produce fruit unless we are connected to the vine, but once we are connected to the vine we are given what we need to produce the fruit and to use the gifts that God has granted us.

So how do we abide in Jesus? Remember it is a relationship and all relationships take time. We engage the spiritual disciplines of prayer, worship, fasting, service, meditation, reading God's word. We abide in Jesus when we allow ourselves to recognize that we belong, and when we devote our time and energy to be at work at strengthening the relationship. Jesus said that we will know that we are abiding when we produce fruit. Our fruit takes various shapes and sizes and appearances. Perhaps it is the fruit of the spirit found in Galatians – joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. **Being forever intimately joined with the vine, with Jesus, also means that we are to begin to love who and what Jesus loves, cry and lament for what makes Jesus weep, and rejoice for what makes Jesus cry out with joy.**

So, you have heard the invitation from Jesus to abide in him, and you have said yes, joyfully accepted the gift of salvation and proclaimed that to the world as you accepted the waters of baptism. So now I want you to picture in your mind a vine and as you envision this vine I want you to imagine that it only has one branch, you. How does that image look to you? Of course this would be a rather funny image of a vine if it only had one branch, so let's add some branches and now think of your favorite people who share your faith and add their branches to the vine pictured in your head. Ah, now isn't that better? However, it doesn't quite work like that. Still thinking of this lovely vine I want you to add the other branches that

represent the people in the church that annoy you, frustrate you, those with whom you vehemently disagree with, those that embarrass you. Ah, now how does that feel? You see this potent image of the vine and the branches not only articulate how we abide in Jesus and receive our life from him, it also articulates how we are forever, and ever, and ever connected with other branches who too are attached to the vine. Here Jesus is talking about what it means to truly belong somewhere.

There was a familiar TV show that ran for eleven seasons between 1982-1993^v and I assume that many of us were exposed to it. In fact I think that many of us could sing the theme song. The show was Cheers and the theme song had lyrics that something like:

Making your way in the world today takes everything you've got. Taking a break from all your worries, sure would help a lot. Wouldn't you like to get away? Sometimes you want to go where everybody knows your name, and they're always glad you came. You wanna be where you can see, our troubles are all the same, you wanna go where everybody knows your name.

The story depicted a type of community where people would faithfully come and climb up on the barstool and share out of their experiences. They walked through the door and others were glad to see them, welcomed them, knew parts of their story, and called them by name.

I believe that deep within each of us is a desire and a need to feel that we belong somewhere. Moreover we will go to great lengths to establish that sense of belonging, even resorting to technology which I asserts gives us a false sense of community and false sense of belonging. However, if we analyzed the relationships on a show like Cheers or The Office or NCIS or any other TV show we would see that relationships for the most part are mediocre at best and never reach a level deeper than the surface. The reality is that we need to have a place of belonging in which there is a chair waiting for us, surrounded by people who know far more about us than just our names. Perhaps the song could have gone sometimes like this:

we want to go where everybody knows what makes us laugh, what makes us cry, the burdens we carry, the gifts we bring, and not only do they know your name, and you know their name, but we all belong.

This is the sense of belonging that Jesus describes in verse 16 when he says “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit – fruit that will last.” As we think about our relationship with Jesus and our relationship with each other we must keep in mind that we are chosen by God. We never need to feel that we do not belong in the vine, or that we are not wanted, or loved, or needed. In fact while we were still sinners, Jesus died for us, so that we might fully believe and understand that we do in fact belong. Ah, I belong in the vine, and you belong in the vine, and you belong in the vine. And by abiding in the vine we automatically relate to the other branches, whether we like to or not. Together we become a living organic unit that lives and breathes. Furthermore, Jesus says that this new community of branches connected to the vine is to be marked with the prominent characteristic of love.

Marlene Kropf and Eddy Hall in their little book “Praying with the Anabaptists” honestly describes this new community this way:

What is it that binds this community together? Personal attraction? Shared culture? National loyalties? Doctrinal agreement? No, this is a community formed by the life – the divine life – its members share. Or, to use the imagery of vine and the branches, this is a community made up of the vine and all the branches through which the life of the vine flows. Not only is each branch connected to the vine, but through the vine, all the branches are joined to one another. Sometimes we may not be sure if this is good news or bad. However appealing the idea of community may be, in practice, living in community is often messy and always hard work. Wouldn't it be nice, we may wonder, if we could just enjoy God without having to bother with all the brothers and sisters in God's family? But God doesn't give us that option. To enter into relationship with God is to join the family of God, which includes people hard to get along with, people whose politics annoy us, people whose customs baffle us, and people whose words or actions embarrass us.

How can God possibly expect us to relate meaningfully with people with whom we have nothing in common expect our faith in God? Well, that is not only the mystery of Christian community but also its genius. Christian community doesn't depend on human affinity of any stripe – cultural, political, or doctrinal. God's life flowing through us as the life of the vine courses through its branches – this and nothing else makes us one in Christ. While I must stretch to include those with whom I would not naturally choose to associate, I also take comfort in knowing that others will stretch to include me. When I am hard to get along with, I have brothers and sisters who will not desert me. When my views seem strange or wrongheaded, they will still love me. When I make choices that leave them shaking their heads, they will not disown me. We are bound together by something that runs deeper than our likes and dislikes, our similarities and dissimilarities, our agreements and disagreements. We are joined by a reality that empowers us to transcend our differences enough to truly love one another. The Christian community does not always live up to this high calling, it's true. Yet it is only here that we can ever find a fully satisfying and lasting answer to our own hunger to be safe, understood, and cared for – in the shared life created by the divine life we share. ^{vi} Amen.

As a pastor I sometimes have the gift of seeing the church be the church to each other in ways that are not always public to all the branches on the vine. I have witnessed this potent community through the gift of the Sharing Fund as I sit with households experiencing financial difficulties and am able to link them with the gift of our Sharing Fund. Individuals contribute to the Sharing Fund as a way to give to others on the vine who have financial burdens, and with each dollar contributed and extended that branch says to other branches: When life is difficult and the way looks too steep I will help carry your load, you are a part of me.

I have witnessed this type of community as a group gathers around a couple who have experienced a miscarriage and are grieving the death of a baby and the loss of their dream for their family. And here I see the other branches surrounding those that are hurting and saying, I will help carry your load, you are a part of me.

I have witnessed branches gather together to celebrate milestones of life from birthdays, to high school graduations, to weddings, to reporting back on service adventures, to the arrival of babies or grandbabies to great-grandbabies, to retirement, to downsizing homes. And again I see the other branches surrounding those that are rejoicing, and transitioning, and growing and saying to those branches, I join you in your joy, you are a part of me.

I have observed branches surrounding other branches that are discerning which direction to go, what house to buy, which degree to pursue, which spiritual gift they possess or what avenue to explore to share that gift. And I see branches say to those branches that are discerning, afraid, or uncertain: I will sit with you and seek God's direction with you, you are a part of me.

I have observed branches stooping down and washing the feet of another branch, wiping away the tears from another's eyes, placing the bread and the cup in another's hands, enfolding one in a heartfelt hug, laying on one hands in prayer, carrying out furniture from a flooded basement, rallying to cover lawn care for someone no longer able to complete their own tasks. In each and every case the branches are echoing to each other: As I abide with Jesus I abide with you, you are a part of me.

The calling this morning is for each branch to recognize and respond to the invitation to abide in Jesus, to allow the Holy Spirit to continue to mold and form our hearts so that we become more and more like Jesus. And the calling is for each of us to recognize and celebrate the interconnectedness of each of the branches on the vine and to ask ourselves, am I loving others well? Am I loving as Jesus loves? How could I proclaim to another branch, even yet today, that I am here and you are a part of me?

What a gift to be connected in community – connected to the vine and connected to each other. Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Willard Swartley, John: Believers Church Bible Commentary (Herald Press: Harrisonburg, VA), 360.

ⁱⁱ Swartley, John, 360.

ⁱⁱⁱ Swartley, John, 360.

^{iv} Swartley, John, 358.

^v <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cheers>

^{vi} Marlene Kropf & Eddy Hall, *Praying with the Anabaptist: The Secret of Bearing Fruit* (Faith and Life Press: Newton, Kansas), 71-72.