

Abiding in the Vine

Today's gospel reading for this the Fifth Sunday of Easter takes us back to Maundy Thursday. . . back to that night in the week before the Resurrection . . . before the Crucifixion . . back to that night in which he (Jesus) was betrayed.

Maybe it is because of the betrayal that this reading at first seems to be about judgement. And let's admit it, the image we get here is a little severe, cutting. . . slashing . . . burning. No one wants to end up cut off . . . withered . . .and tossed away. Our minds likely go there because deep down we know we are not worthy. . . that this is what we really deserve. So it is natural that at first glance this is what we see and hear in Jesus' words. I wonder what the disciples heard. Taking a closer look into the text I imagine it was quite different.

This reading is part of the larger story in John's account that gives many examples of Jesus' last instructions to his disciples. We are told that Jesus knew that his time had come to depart from this world and go to the Father. The gospel writer also mentions his love for his disciples. Jesus had little time left and so much more to teach them. He must have felt some anxiety knowing he had to let go. It was almost time for them to take over his work. Were they ready? Would they be all right on their own? In his heart he knew it was time to let go, but like a mother sending her children off to school for the first time he just had to get in a few last minute instructions.

The first thing he did was get up from the table, take off his outer robe, tied a towel around his waist, pour water into a pitcher and begin to wash the disciple's feet. With such little time left he would have to teach them visually as well as orally to get his point across. When he had finished washing and drying the feet of all the disciples he stood and said: "So if I, your Lord and teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have set you an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Jesus teaches them not by telling them as much as by showing them.

Throughout the Gospel of John, Jesus teaches by referring to himself with many rich metaphors. I am the Good Shepherd . . . I am the Gate . . .I am the Bread of Life ...I am the Vine – this vivid imagery invites us to really fully enter into Jesus' story and into his teachings. So this morning let's accept Jesus invitation and enter the story. Enter and imagine it together.

Following the evening meal, on the way to the Mount of Olives, Jesus and his disciples are walking quietly together in the cool of night. As they walk along they share quiet conversation. They follow a well-worn garden path – moonlight rays light their way. The air is still and the heat of the day has past. Jesus and his disciples make their way along a stony trail and they begin to pass by a long row of grapevines growing along a garden wall.

It would have been so easy to pass by the tangled mass of trailing grape branches without even taking notice. But Jesus doesn't walk by. Jesus takes notice. Jesus reaches out his hand and snaps off a woody branch and with the branch in his hand turns to his disciples saying "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower."

"I, I am the vine and you are the branches." Can you imagine Jesus holding the branch in his outstretched palm – it's brittle – it looks lifeless. Jesus looks so intently at it – he turns it over in

his hand - he examines it and after a few quiet moments he goes on, saying: “My Father the vine grower “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 this branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me”.

The disciples draw in as close as they can around Jesus – they look at each other with curious expressions – they wonder amongst themselves what is this, that Jesus is saying? They strain all the more to get as close as they can to.

They don't want to miss one single word!

We imagine Jesus speaking in a calming quiet voice to his disciples saying, “I, I am the vine and you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” Come abide in me –

Abide in me because apart from me you can do nothing!!

Jesus stands- encircled by his disciples– he's still holding the lifeless branch in his hand. What did he just say? one disciple turns to another to ask.

These disciples who had witnessed Jesus turn water into wine – feed a hungry multitude with a few loaves and fishes – witness Jesus heal the sick and cast out evil spirits now at this late hour of the night they share another profound moment with Jesus. They wonder about this message about a Vine? Branches? Bearing fruit? And abiding....

Abiding . . . that's what this story is about. It is not judgment and being cast into the fire. It's about abiding. Now “abide” is not a word we toss around a lot. The word used in the Greek is *μεινω* [men ohn] and it literally translates as remain, stay, dwell, or lodge. The NRSV uses abide instead of remain or dwell because through this metaphor Jesus gives the word a deeper meaning. When Jesus says remain with the vine he means it as an inward . . . enduring . . . personal . . . connection. Jesus means much more than just sticking around, Jesus is speaking about a intimate relationship.

Jesus is urging his disciples to remain in him and with him. He knows he is about to go, to leave them behind, first in the experience of the cross but even after the resurrection through his ascension. And he wants them to be prepared, to remain in fellowship with each other and to abide in his teaching and example. This message is not just for the disciples. . . it is for all of us. Jesus wants all of us to abide in him.

How do we do that? Do we see our life . . . our spiritual practices . . . our worship as helping us abide in Christ? A favorite theologian of mine asks,

Do we even know or think about what abiding in Christ would look like? Do we feel connected like branches to a vine to Jesus, our congregation or, for that matter, to anything at all? To what do we feel connected? Or maybe it's more than connected. I mean, one of the challenges of our modern life is that we're 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 and 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

Our churches should be a place where we learn to abide in Christ, to be in relationship with him and with one another. Yet how often do we see people avoid the church when they need it most. A couple separates and avoids worship. An addiction is buried behind closed doors. We allow a conflict or disagreement with a sister or brother to keep us away. Through any of that, Jesus begs us, “Please abide, remain, stay, with me . . . with one another. Don’t cut yourself off and wither away.

I can’t help but imagine that this whole abiding business is like a dance . . . a dance through life if you will . . . learning to become one . . . a movement between us and Jesus . . . a connection between us and one another . . . the fruits of our dance increasing in bounty and flavour . . . round after round . . . year after year. By being connected to Jesus we are able to be connected to one another. Our practice glorifying the Vine grower.

But this dance is not an easy one. All relationships require work. And it is hard. A real relationship requires us to become vulnerable. We have to be able to let go of protecting ourselves and be open to the possibility that we might even be hurt. Through this gospel text, this is what we are invited to try and do.

What Jesus invites us to do is to be genuine, to be honest about who and what we are. Even if that means admitting our inclination to flee the light 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 blessing and our sin, to know what we are accepted, loved, and forgiven. Jesus reveals, after all, the God who loves the whole world enough to send the Son.ⁱⁱ

In the light of the gospel, illuminated by God's acceptance of us, we have already been cleansed by the word that Jesus has spoken. We need not worry about the binding and burning. It is true we are imperfect and flawed, but the greater truth is that abiding in Christ we are also an alive part of him. A part of the whole . . . pruned and loved . . . may we bear much fruit.

Let us pray,

Great grower of the vineyard, we know you see our world of brokenness, of sin, of shame, of hate and of pain. You not only see it, you came in Jesus and lived it with us. And yet you do not dwell there. You offer us Jesus so that we might abide in him, showing us yourself in him, showing us that your compassion and your love know no bounds, not even death. Give us the faith to believe this great news, and then to let love make a claim on us, that we might remain in love, stay in love, dwell in love, endure in love, connect in love. Bearing much fruit and glorifying you, through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

Amen.

ⁱ Lose, David “Getting Real” http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=583

ⁱⁱ ibid