

Living into the Reality of Grace
John 15:1-9 2021

John 15:1-9 (New Revised Standard Version)

”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. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

Near the end of his earthly mission & ministry, and his mortal life,
Jesus and his disciples gathered in the Upper Room
for a final meal, teaching and conversation together.

He was preparing them for the events of the Passion and Easter,
and the task of building the Church, of which we are also a part.

In the Old Testament several of the prophets of Israel described
how God had transplanted slaves from Egypt into the Promised Land
as a carefully-planted and well-equipped and tended vineyard...

...but that despite the vineyard owner’s hard work and effort,
the vineyard had not produced the good fruit as intended,
just as Israel had not been true or faithful to the Lord.

In contrast to the faithlessness of Israel, Jesus explained, vs. 1, 4-5

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

Preparing for ministry, I served in a church as an intern for a year.
At year-end, my mentor and I spent a day walking along a beach
so we could talk about ministry and what I had learned
from that experience of doing pastoral ministry.

We covered many topics that day, and then I asked him,
**how, amid all the demands, pressures and stress of ministry,
do you keep your own faith fresh, active and growing,
and not let your spiritual fervor and vitality wane?**

I thought he might give me a 10 point check list, like,
morning devotions daily, or read through the Bible once a year, ...
... but that's not what he said.

I thought he might tell me I should try harder and more consistently,
to stay focused and diligent about prayer, mission and ministry ...
... but that's not what he said.

Instead, he told me I needed to **live into the reality of God's grace**
by trusting Jesus Christ to accomplish and fulfill God's purpose,
and that my task was primarily, **to abide in Christ**,
so that the Lord can produce a fruitful and useful life.

He said it's not so much our efforts & deeds as it is our affections.

He explained, the Lord is an ever-flowing fountain of gracious love,
which flows in and then out through us like water through a pipe...
... and as long as that flow is unimpeded and can run freely,
our life in Christ will grow and be ever more faithful & fruitful,
as we abide, as free-flowing conduits of God's gracious love.

Then he explained that two things had made the difference for him.
First, it's about making the right **little decisions**,
and **second**, carving out some space for listening to God,
and making time enough for the Spirit to speak and guide.

He went on to explain,
that in life we are constantly making small choices – minor things
and the trick is to evaluate all our choices and options
in terms of faithfulness to God and to God's word & will.

Our lives are defined mostly by the choices and decisions we make,
and one choice will generally bring us a little closer to God,
and the other, probably won't.
One choice requires stepping out in obedience, trust and faith,
while the other seems a little safer & feels more comfortable.

One path leads to being more focused on building the kingdom of God
and the other more likely pursues the things & goods of this world.

He said it comes down to our seemingly minor decisions in life,
that more often than not,
are quite subtle in how they build on other little things.

But if we will pause, pray and think about it,
one will increase our connectedness to Christ more than the other.

It's not necessarily an obvious choice between good and evil,
but more likely, one way is a little more difficult and faithful,
one way more worthy of a follower of Jesus ...

... and the key to "**abide**" is the path we choose,
the one that puts us in a place where God can use us,
which keeps our faith real, growing, fresh and alive.

His second insight and suggestion recognizes the reality
that our lives are busy with endless demands and pressures ---
and that unless

we are intentional about making space in our lives,
then other stuff will surely crowd the Lord out...
... which will impede the flow of God's grace in and through our lives.

So let's examine and consider what Jesus is saying, vs. 1-2, 4 & 6

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

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

This passage is often read and interpreted as a harsh threat,
a clear warning to try harder, to be more fruitful, or else...
... you'll be removed to wither, be pruned & thrown into the fire.

As a young boy I remember Sunday School teachers explaining
that the point was to be good and try harder to be fruitful,
and it was almost always as a guilt-inducing challenge...

...for no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't be sure I'd done enough,
and since even on my best and most faithful day, I fell far short,
the whole thing seemed pretty hopeless and discouraging.

However, in the Greek, the word that is translated, "he removes",
also means "to lift or raise something up off the ground",
which describes how vine dressers will gently lift up fallen vines
and carefully clean and tie those branches onto the trellis,
which then enables them to produce grapes and be fruitful.

That is much like when Kathy and I lived along the NC coast,
and each time a hurricane would blast through our area,
it would cause considerable damage to my poor little garden.

Afterward I had to clear debris, prune and tie-up the injured plants,
trying to heal & tenderly restore my garden from the storm damage.

Going along with that, the word translated, "he prunes" (καθαρίζω)
also means, to cleanse, to heal, to nurture and to restore,
like our word in English, catharsis or cathartic.

The idea of this lifting or cleansing is to make the plant whole,
and to renew or repair whatever is crushed, broken or damaged.
**which is what Jesus is describing in this passage in John,
trying to heal and restore us from storms of life we endure.**

And there is more, the grace and healing of God goes even further,
in that **through the difficulties and struggles of our lives,**
God prunes and trims our distortions, wounds and failings,
working for our good, and toward our fruitful development.

As Paul explains in Romans 8:28

We know that all things work together **for good** for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose.

So this passage is not about an angry or brutal vine-dresser,
who relentlessly demands more work and endless productivity,
and who hacks off and burns
any damaged or broken limbs or fallen branches...
...it's not about a God who gives up on us in harsh and wrathful disgust.

When Jesus spoke the words of this passage from John,
it was the night of the Last Supper, just hours before
he was betrayed and abandoned by his own disciples.
and he knew full well that they would all fail to be true & faithful.

These are his wonderful words of promise, encouragement and comfort,
words of hope and a way to return, even when we've failed & fallen,
**promising, when we abide in Jesus, as he abides in us,
that grace will overcome our failures, mistakes & fear.**

The point is, Christ abides in us with gracious love, hope & healing,
and as we receive & cooperate by living into that reality of grace,
we are gradually transformed into useful & fruitful disciples.

**And when we fail, which we will, our compassionate vine-dresser
will still lift us up, heal and support us so that we can bear fruit.**

Jesus promises to accomplish what we cannot do for ourselves. vs.4, 5, 9

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.** As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

A branch cannot work harder or by its determination, bear more fruit.
Other than choosing to remain connected to vine or not,
there is really not much that the branch can do
to change or alter its production of the fruit.

But if are we abiding in Christ and clinging to the true vine
then grace can flow, and Christ can produce his fruit in us.
God has given us his love, and abide is the way we receive it.

This passage is about gracious love, truth and the assurance of hope,
especially for people who are weary, stressed, tired or hurting
or frustrated, or discouraged that for all they try and do,
yet still feel like unworthy failures and defeated.

It is hope for those who feel not good enough, or righteous enough,
who are not faithful enough, have not accomplished enough,
are not spiritual enough, or sure about abiding in Christ.

Abide is really about our attitude and the affections we share.
It is accepting and receiving God's gift of invitation

by letting the Lord's mercy and grace heal our broken lives.

Actually even to desire more from God, to draw nearer to the Lord
that in itself is a sign of God's grace at work in our lives.

Abide means staying in a relationship with God, **trusting the Lord**,
who promises to show us how to make the right little choices,
and we abide by creating space and time in our busy lives
to wait for God to speak and by living into God's grace...

... and so we come to the Lord's Table, where all are **invited to abide**,
the place where and when and the way
we eat and drink together **as the One Body**
as a reminder that points us toward living into God's grace.