

May 10, 2009

Scripture: John 15:1-8

Sermon: "The True Vine"

Before I begin this sermon, I have to admit that I struggled with this passage this past week. I have read this Scripture before and I have always found comfort in the phrase, "Abide in me just as I abide in you." It is a nice thought. Abiding in God and knowing that God is abiding in me. Gave me comfort during the crazy times of life. Gave me strength for the journey. Gave me a foundation for my faith.

Until this week...As I began my sermon preparation, the question came up, "Am I really abiding in God and am I allowing God to abide in me?" I call myself a person of faith. I call myself a Christian but do I really let God abide in me?

Or have I treated God like a houseguest? You know, put clean sheets on the bed, put clean towels out for God to use, straightened up the guest room and tried to make God feel welcome in my house, knowing that after three days, the visit would be coming to an end. Because I don't know if you are like me, I enjoy guests visiting but I look forward to when they are gone because then my life can get back to normal. Things got in their place. Schedules slow down. Life returns to some sort of normalcy.

So I was surprised by the uncomfortable feeling that has followed me all week every time the question came up: "Am I really abiding in God and am I allowing God to really abide in me?" I call myself a person of faith. I call myself a Christian. But do I really abide in God? Do I really want God abiding in me?

Or have I only allowed God in my life to a certain degree, to a certain limit, to a certain point and then no further?

And then the uncomfortable feeling intensified as my thoughts turned to the church and I began to wonder, "Are we as a church doing the same thing? Are we really abiding in God and are we allowing God to abide in us?"

Not easy questions. Not comfortable questions. And certainly not questions that we want to find ourselves asking.

And it was at that moment that I heard the snip, snip of pruning shears. It was at that moment that I felt the pain of pruning and the renewal of new life that the pruning had brought forth. It was at that moment I felt God's hands moving over my heart, moving over our mission as the church, moving over our vocation as people of faith, carefully cutting away the debris, carefully cutting down the barriers, carefully cutting away the fragments that are preventing new growth and new life from happening.

It was in that moment that I really understood what it meant to abide in God and let God abide in me. If we truly abide in God and let God abide in us, then we become open to God's urging, to God's pushing, to God's nudging out of our comfort zone. If we truly abide in God and let God abide in us, then we celebrate the baptismal water flowing over us, smoothing out our rough places, breaking down our barriers, and becoming who God created us to be. If we truly abide in

God and let God abide in us, then we understand that those moments of pruning along our faith journey are “necessary, supportive acts to assure that [we as people of faith] continue to fulfill our purpose.”

Because when we really abide in God and let God abide in us, we bear the fruit of God’s love and we love as God who first loved us. We become tangible examples of God’s love here on earth because we are grounded and nurtured through a life-giving relationship with Jesus, no barriers, no walls, no limits, a relationship that frees us because God first loved us, a relationship that sustains us for the journey because God abides in us and we abide in God. And that is the good news that this world needs to hear now!

Just like the disciples need to hear on that night Jesus was betrayed. Jesus gathered his disciples together and began to give them some last minute advice. He knew his time was short and he wanted his disciples to know that they were not alone. He knew that they would face uncertainty, doubt, and struggle with their calling as disciples after his death and even after his resurrection.

So he gives them words of comfort. He lets them know that they will not be able, that the Holy Spirit will be there to guide them. And then he starts talking about being the true vine and saying to abide in God and let God abide in them.

Jesus tells his disciples, “Picture this. I am the true vine, whose roots are deep in the soil and give you strength and nurture you on the journey. Think about the branches of the vine. They twist and they turn and they become almost one, so that you can’t tell where one ends and one begins. And each branch can trace its way back to the vine, that nourishes their growth and gives them life.

These branches can’t survive on their own. They need the vine to sustain them. They need the deep roots of the vine to lift up nourishment from the ground so that they can live. They need the vine.

And picture this: God is like a master gardener who knows that for new growth to happen, the gardener has to cut away the dead branches. For the branches to continue to grow and survive, the gardener has to prune away all that is keeping growth from happening. So God carefully cuts away the pain, carefully cuts away the hurt, carefully cuts away the frustrations of faith, carefully cuts away the debris that is damaging the new growth and allows new life to happen.

The pruning is painful for both the vine and the gardener but think what will happen after the pruning happens. The vine and the branches will flourish. The branches will continue to grow. The branches will bear fruit.

And all of it is made possible because the vine and the branches are nourished by the deep roots that have found their way into the soil and are there, holding on with all their might. That soil is our relationship with God. That relationship is life-giving and we cannot survive without that relationship.

For us to really flourish and grow, we have to abide in God and let God abide in us. We have to really absorb the nourishment from our relationship with God by opening our hearts and our minds to God, no walls and no boundaries if we are to bear fruit. Because “the source of our true

joy is not our personal experience of God but the way God's love of us works in and through us to keep us growing into Christ."

Our vocation as people of faith is to bear fruit, fruit of God's love for all of this world to sample, to relish, and to satisfy their hungry hearts. This world is starving and we are called to bear the fruit that will cease its hunger that is caused by violence, caused by hate, caused by injustice. We are called to bear fruit, the fruit of God's love and feed the world, to show God's love to all of God's children.

We must remember that it is the "fruit of the vine, not the number of branches, that is the mark of love and faithfulness." We must remember that "the true measure of [us as a community of faith] is how [our] actions, [our] fruits bear witness to the abiding presence of God."

And the only way we can do that is to be in true relationship with God, no walls, no boundaries, no limits. We must truly abide in God and let God abide in us and open ourselves to God's urgings and God's pushings to go beyond our comfort zone and to become the people God created us to be and to bear the fruit of hope, the fruit of peace, the fruit of justice and the fruit of love for this broken and hurting world.

That is the good news that this world needs to hear right now. That is the good news that both you and I need to hear right now. That is the good news that this community of faith needs to hear right now.

Let us open our hearts to God. Let us open our vocation as people of faith to God. Let us open our mission of Welcome up to God.

And yes, we may hear the snip, snip of the pruning shears. And yes, we may feel the pain of the pruning shears.

But we will understand that God is carefully cutting away the debris, the fragments, the barriers that are preventing us from becoming the people that God created us to be and bearing the fruit of God's love. We will understand that the debris, the barriers are preventing us from truly being in relationship with God and truly abiding in God and letting God abide in us.

Because when we really abide in God and let God abide in us, we bear the fruit of God's love and we love as God who first loved us. We become tangible examples of God's love here on earth because we are grounded and nurtured through a life-giving relationship with Jesus, no barriers, no walls, no limits, a relationship that frees us because God first loved us, a relationship that sustains us for the journey because God abides in us and we abide in God.

May the debris and the fragments of life be pruned away so that we can truly become the people that God created us to be. Amen.

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