

## ABIDE WITH ME

John 15:1-8

*A sermon given by Dr. Larry R. Hayward on the Sixth Sunday of Easter, May 17, 2009, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

### FOCUS TEXT:

*'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. 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.*

I have shared with you before, but want to emphasize again, that when we read a passage from one of the gospels, three entities are involved in the process.

- There is first the original tradition about Jesus – a story, a teaching, an event – that circulated by word of mouth among his followers for several decades.
- There is second a written account passed down to us from Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, an account on which each writer has put his own theological stamp and literary style.
- And there is third the way that account impacts us as we encounter the passage in corporate worship, in the classroom, in personal study or devotion.

In addition, into this Trinity of tradition, writer, and reader, the Holy Spirit makes a promised appearance, making its presence known, breathing life into the exchange. As the spirit breathes life into the process, scripture is “inspired by God,” for in Greek, the word “in-spired” simply means “God breathes.”

This is a high-minded promise, terrifically theological. But you and I both know that not all Scripture is immediately “inspiring” to us. In fact, when we first encounter it, much of it seems prosaic and incomprehensible. To say this is not to denigrate scripture; it is to speak a truth about what we bring to the task of reading it or listening to it in worship.

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In all honesty, the passage before us today – in which Jesus compares *himself* to a vine and *us* to its branches – has never been very inspiring for me.

- I am much more a creature of the city than a creature of nature.
- I am neither a gardener, vineyard owner, nor connoisseur of wine.
- I do much better when Jesus uses analogies involving fathers and sons, masters and servants, brothers and sisters than when he teaches by means of analogies to plants, animals, or inanimate objects.

Inasmuch as God breathes in this passage for me, his breathing is the labored breathing of the respirator rather than the tender noise of baby's breath.

But as a lover of scripture and a preacher committed to its centrality in the church, I feel it my “bounden duty” to stick with a text, even when it means I must draw near and listen closely to hear God's breath emanating from it. I want to share with you today some of the problems I have encountered with “the vine and the branches” and some of the resolutions I have reached, in hopes that the process or the end product speaks to you.

Let us pray: *Though appearing to Moses through burning bush and to shepherds and angels in a manger, you have come to us primarily through words – the words of the Bible, the words of the preacher, the words of a grandmother who most told us of you. Send us your spirit today that once again the words you have provided on the page will become a living, breathing word in our hearts, on our lips, in the work of our hands. Amen.*

## I.

The first problem I encounter in this text is that there is nothing for us *to do* in it.

Seven times in John Jesus presents himself as “I AM” – the name for God in the Old Testament – and compares himself to objects of the earth:

- I am the bread of life (6:35)
- I am the light of the world (8:12, 9:5)
- I am the gate of the sheep (10:7, 9)
- I am the Good Shepherd (10:11, 14)
- I am the resurrection and the life (11:25-26)
- I am the way, the truth, and the life (14:6)

And in our passage:

- I am the true vine (15:1).

In each of these “I AM” statements – except for ours – we can respond to who he is, to his “I AM,” with some sort of action:

- We can *partake* of the bread of life in the Lord’s Supper
- We can *turn toward* the light he offers the world.
- We can *walk through* the gate he opens for us.
- We can *follow* his voice as shepherd.
- We can *lift* our hearts in light of his resurrection.
- We can *walk* in the way provides.
- We can *affirm* the truth he brings.
- We can *give* ourselves to the life he offers.

Even though in his final “I AM” image, he commands us as “branches” to “abide” in him as vine, the imagery breaks down.

You see in Greek, the word for “abide” and the word for “remain” are the same. How can a branch do anything but “abide” – “remain” – on the vine out of which it has grown and to which it is attached by no choice of its own?

- A branch cannot wake up in the morning and say: “Today, I am going to abide in the vine.”
- Nor can it say: “Today, I think I’ll lop myself off the vine, get my own apartment, live on my own.”
- If we are a branch, all we can do is remain in place on the vine, receive food and sustenance from it, and if both we and our host remain healthy, we can bear fruit.
- Abiding simply is. Abiding is what branches do.

Thus, when we hear Jesus tell a branch to “abide in its vine,” the command seems meaningless, the metaphor stretched beyond its ability to convey what Jesus intends.

So given all this, the text simply doesn’t inspire me.

## II.

There is, however, an aspect of this passage that catches my attention as I pour over it, like a bookkeeper with eye-shades studying a hand-written ledger.

When we as individual believers or as a community of believers are compared to a branch whose vine is Christ, it follows that whatever “branch-ness” we exhibit can only occur out of our nature as being a branch attached to a vine.

This leads me to recognize that the two major “activities” that occur in the passage, namely

- Branches “bearing fruit”
  - And their counterparts, disciples, “ask[ing] for whatever [we] wish”
- are activities that are appropriately “second nature.”

- They are not activities about which we have choice.
- We can neither choose to do them, nor choose not to do them.
- They occur because of who we are – branches to vine, disciples to Christ.

And this, believe it or not, is where I get excited about the passage.

You see it can be spiritually liberating for us as individuals or for the church as God’s people not to have to decide how much, what kind of, or what quality of fruit we as branch will bear.

Whatever fruit we bear, whatever, in other words, *we do*, can only flow from our connection with the vine, and that connection comes much more from the vine’s abiding with us than from our efforts to abide in it.

The abiding that occurs is from vine to branch, Christ to us, not the other way around. This I find comforting and liberating.

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Early in my thinking about this passage, an old funeral hymn kept coming to mind: “Abide With Me.” I was not too familiar with this hymn until it was sung acapella by a well-known folksinger at Wayne Henry’s funeral in our sanctuary last November, and then twelve days later, played by the organist at the at the Chapel of the U. S. Naval Academy at Admiral Mike Marschall’s funeral. Two virtually opposite presentations of the same hymn.

Listen to the words of some of the stanzas and notice who it is that does the abiding, the direction in which the abiding moves:

Abide with me; fast falls the eventide;  
 The darkness deepens; Lord with me abide.  
 When other helpers fail and comforts flee,  
 Help of the helpless, O abide with me.  
 Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;  
 Earth’s joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
 Change and decay in all around I see;  
 O Thou who changest not, abide with me.  
 Not a brief glance I beg, a passing word;  
 But as Thou dwell’st with Thy disciples, Lord,  
 Familiar, condescending, patient, free.  
 Come not to sojourn, but abide with me.  
 Come not in terrors, as the King of kings,  
 But kind and good, with healing in Thy wings,  
 Tears for all woes, a heart for every plea—  
 Come, Friend of sinners, and thus bide with me.  
 I need Thy presence every passing hour.  
 What but Thy grace can foil the tempter’s power?  
 Who, like Thyself, my guide and stay can be?  
 Through cloud and sunshine, Lord, abide with me.  
 I fear no foe, with Thee at hand to bless;  
 Ills have no weight, and tears no bitterness.  
 Where is death’s sting? Where, grave, thy victory?  
 I triumph still, if Thou abide with me.<sup>1</sup>

In these stanzas, the abiding is done by the Lord, and the results of the abiding on the one who prays for its continuance grow naturally out of the Lord’s abiding:

- “Foil[ing] the tempter’s power”
- “Fear[ing] no foe”

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<sup>1</sup> Henry F. Lyte, “Abide With Me,” written in 1847. The words to all eight stanzas are available at <http://www.hymntime.com/tch/htm/a/b/abidewme.htm>.

- “Triumph[ing]” over illness, tears, and death.

The vine abides in the branches, and the branches bear fruit.

### III.

With this focus on the “abiding” of Christ in us rather than our attempts to “abide” in him, the most interesting and perhaps liberating verse of the passage comes to life for me: *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

If the abiding of Christ is present in us, if we are truly branch to his vine, prayer then becomes, quite naturally,

- us “ask[ing] for whatever [we] wish”
- and it “be[ing] done” for us

not because we are given what we want but because we ask for that which grows out of Christ abiding in us. By definition, what we receive from his abiding is sufficient.

To bring this down to specifics:

- I want you to know that I am a person of prayer.
- I pray publicly as you see in worship.
- I pray when I visit you in the hospital, when I have a meal with you, even if in a crowded restaurant or an exclusive club, places where prayer seems awkward and intrusive.
- I also pray alone, and with my wife Maggie.

Sometimes when I pray, I am quite specific, praying

- For my life or my family
- For our nation and world
- For Westminster.

And I pray for things you request or which I wish for you:

- For healing
- For a job to be gotten
- For grief to be over come
- For addictions to be mastered.

Yet the more specific I get in my prayers, the more I bracket them with two phrases:

- “Abide”
- “Thy will be done.”

Even when the specificity for which I pray does not materialize, as is often the case, I trust that God abides and that somehow God’s will is being done. In that sense, I believe that what I have asked has been granted, and painful and disappointing as it sometimes is, it is, by definition, sufficient.

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We have moved in this sermon from the nature of reading, through vine and branch, to abiding, to prayer.

I ask you to take this from this sermon:

We are branch  
Attached to a vine  
That always abides in us.

That vine is Jesus Christ.

What more do we need?