

Sermon on John 15:1-8
November 13, 2016
DCPC 11:00 Service
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Sermon 11/13/2016

Accepting Each Other, Bearing Grace

When we first started planning this worship service and I asked to deliver the sermon, I have to be honest with you I had no idea what to say. Vines and pruning and gardening in general are not really my strong suit. Even after reading today's passage I couldn't really come up with any incredible revelations or brilliant insights. But the notion of abiding in God in order to become fruitful started to resonate with me after a while. In verse four we are commanded by Jesus to "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." And although verse 9 of John chapter 15 was not included in our reading today, I believe it is important to mention as well. It states "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

I thought about these verses and what they meant to me and my faith, a faith which has been shaky at best for a large part of my time here at Davidson. I also thought about how to relate it Christians as a whole and the world around us today. Fortunately, in one of my Religious Studies classes this week we read a sermon by the famous theologian Paul Tillich named "You are accepted," which talks about the importance of uniting with others in Christ. It wasn't too hard to make the leap from 'united together in Christ' to 'abiding together in Christ.' And so I began to write a rough draft after class Tuesday afternoon. Unfortunately, the elections happened Tuesday night and threw the whole world upside down. Our country's dividedness, not out unity, was put on full display. Claire, the head of college ministries here whom most of you probably know, sent an email out to all of the college students participating in the three worship services letting us know we could, but did not have to address the election's results and everything that has happened in its wake. This offer was tempting

because it was an easy out. I don't have nearly enough training or any qualifications to speak on gardening and pruning, let alone a topic so crucial yet incredibly delicate. But I realized that not addressing the problems we now clearly see in front of us would be a disservice to God when He has given me such an important time and place to talk and try to spread His Spirit of love. So by using some words and thoughts of people much more eloquent than me, I hope to address the importance of unity amongst ourselves and everyone around us. And despite all the hate and hostility and violence we see in others today, we are called to love and accept everyone, just as Christ has done with all of us.

As Christians we are called to live in the love and divine grace of God and to spread these in the world around us. We are also called to live lives free from sin. And although it is impossible for us as humans to live completely free from sin, we are told to try as hard as we can. Rev. Paul Tillich equates grace with the unity of life and sin with the separation of life. Unity and separation happen in three levels: between a person and others, a person and themselves, and a person and God. Rev. Tillich believes that before we ever commit any act of grace or sin, we exist in a state of unity and separation. It is human to live every day in an uneasy balance between the two. He explains that while we live with ourselves every day, always connected to our body and thoughts, we never truly know ourselves.

There is always a divide between our conscious and subconscious selves. We always try to figure out what exactly is happening in our subconscious, because it sometimes makes us do or think or feel things we don't completely understand. These can be as innocent as a reflexive smile when treated with care and love, but our subconscious can often be so strange that it is scary. The separation between what we find familiar with ourselves and what we call strange is often a problem for many of us and can lead us to un-Christian things. The same separation is true between ourselves and others. We will never truly know any other person completely. Rev. Tillich points to how even life-long partners

find it impossible to completely understand each other. More often than not we gravitate towards other people who are familiar to us, or we find comfort in the things the people around us have in common, ignoring or pushing away the people and parts of a person we can't really understand because they are so different than what we know. Sometimes this uncomfortableness can turn into a sense of danger and lead to hostility, hate, and violence. On a grander scale, we will never know God, Jesus, or the Holy Spirit entirely either. This divine entity is an existence beyond our wildest imaginations. God is as awe-inspiring as He is unknown. But we do know that He accepts us, He loves us, unconditionally. We know this because Jesus tells us this over and over and over again that we are His, simply by being. "You have already been cleansed by the word I have spoken to you." All he asks in return is that we accept our acceptance. "Abide in me as I abide in you," He commands. And although we can't help but feel a sense of separation between us and God the Father Almighty, simply by believing we are perfectly united in Him, like a branch to a vine.

Rev. Tillich believes our connection to God gives us His divine grace. With His grace, rooted in His acceptance of us as a basis, we can then grow to accept ourselves. We can find unity between our familiar conscious and the strange in our subconscious. Once we have accepted the strange, the different, the scary within ourselves, we can extend that acceptance to people around us. We can, and should, accept the differences of others. We should make constant efforts to connect with others without making them discard their differences. How can we ask a stranger to change who they are or how they act just because we are uncomfortable around them? If the love and acceptance of Jesus for us was unconditional, should we not follow his example and accept those around us unconditionally as well? I do not want to imply that we have to agree with the beliefs of everyone around us or even like the people around us. I think we are all familiar with the phrase 'you don't have to like someone to love them.' People can say terrible things and hurt others in tragic ways. In politics today, it is so easy to

demonize and judge people with different opinions. We have begun to make a habit dehumanizing those who we don't agree with, and stopping ourselves from even trying to understand our opponent's positions. We fail to see the truth in what others might say and the common ground we actually share. We ignore the fact that we are all God's children. We are loved by Him unconditionally and abide in Him. The only way we can have hope for a less divided country, a more loving church, and the grace of God in our lives is to fully accept each other and our differences. We have to embrace everything that we think separates in order to come together and solve our problems and get rid of our hate. By being together we can abide in God as He abides in us.

But of course we are human. It is impossible to live gracefully every day in every aspect of our lives. There will always be separations of some sort between ourselves, others, and God. But in this passage of John, Jesus lets us know that this human flaw will be taken care of by God the Father, the vine-grower. As long as we abide in Him, stay united in Him, and accept Him, we will be fruitful. We will bear a grace that will break down the barriers of separation and sin and find unity together. At first we may not abide in perfect unity. In fact we may not end up much better off than before. But God's promise is that he will help us to be better if we try. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." Eventually, if we keep our faith in Him, we will prevail. We will bring more grace into this world than sin. We will accept more than we reject, and will be able to help others do the same. By being unifiers in our world, we not only glorify God but lead others to do so as well. Verse eight tells us directly, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

In Hillary Clinton's concession speech Wednesday, she quoted Galatians chapter 6. Despite what you may think of her, I found the passage of Scripture she used to be incredibly powerful and important for our nation to hear. In the second verse of this chapter of Paul's letter, he commands the

early Christians to “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ.” The unity of the Christian body, the deliverance of people out of sin and into grace, and the acceptance of all peoples is not just the burden of a few in our country or our congregations. These responsibilities do not fall on the marginalized or those who force them there, the abused or the abusers, the scorned or the ones who spread hate. These responsibilities are all of our burdens. They are our crosses to bear. We cannot sit idly by confessing our faith every Sunday and hope for unity. As Christians we must work to realize it. We all know what God calls us to do is hard, that is the first thing we learn when we join the church. It is even impossible to do by ourselves. But when we abide in God we have a guarantee that we will succeed. Verses 9 and 10 of Galatians go on to encourage our grace-filled struggle by telling us to “not grow weary in doing what is right, for we will reap at harvest time, if we do not give up. So then, whenever we have an opportunity, let us work for the good of all and especially for those of the family of faith.” Our mission to glorify God by bringing everyone together and accepting them as part of His family and as part of this country has no doubt gotten much harder in the last few days, and will remain difficult in the days and years to come, but we must do all that we can. First we must abide in Christ, then we must learn to love and accept ourselves, and finally we must unite with others around us. It is in unity we bring about God’s grace and glorify his name.

To end, I would like to read a few words from Dr. Bonnie Glass-Coffin, a Professor of Utah State University. These are words she shared with her class Wednesday morning after the election. She teaches a class called “Peoples of Latin America” and has students of many different backgrounds, although, being in Utah, most are white. She offered them to her students as, “a step towards healing and reconciliation, from the heart of a very divided campus, in a very divided state, in a very divided nation.” I believe her words speak to a much larger audience that extends past her class, her school, and her state, and can reach us here right now.

“Today I grieve. I am grieving so hard that I didn’t think I would be able to stand up and teach this class today. This election has touched me personally: I am a woman. I am the mother of a differentially-abled child. I am the mother of an African American child. Many of my closest friends and relatives are LGBTQ, and immigrants, and Latinos, and Muslims, and Native Americans, and former refugees. Today, I worry about the impact of this election on behalf of all whom I love. I have spent my entire life championing diversity, because I believe it is good. Because I believe it is right. Because of who I am. Because of who I still believe we are.

Today I grieve. Last night was such a sucker-punch for those, like me, who believed that these values were important for most Americans, across the board. The reality we woke up to this morning is one that threatens and challenges that assumption. We live in Utah. As I look out across this room this morning I know the probability that many more of you voted for Donald Trump than for Hillary Clinton. I know that we are all feeling the strain of these differences this morning. An hour ago, while buying my breakfast, I ran into a friend who voted for Trump. I told him that, quite honestly, I didn’t know if I could look him in the eyes today—because of his vote. I saw the wall that immediately came up between us when I challenged him.

And so I grieve. But, this morning, I heard from one of my Native American friends who basically said to me, “why are you in the middle of such a pity party? Don’t you realize that this is what my people have experienced for centuries? Don’t you know that all you are losing is your white-privilege? Come join the fight. Stand up and brush yourself off. The world hasn’t changed, only your perception of it! The needs haven’t changed—only your stance in relation to those in need.”

And yet I grieve. I feel shame and anger and loss and heartbreak. I feel denial and fear and shock and outrage and condemnation. But, I believe that all these emotions can be channeled to do

good work, for the good of all. I believe we need the anger and the sadness. I believe we also need the joy and relief that many of you may feel because you voted for a new way of doing things and against a system that no longer functions. We need all the emotion. And we need to move beyond our divisions in order to heal. I believe we can. Because, more than anything else, as I look out across this lecture hall today, I believe that we share a common humanity that goes beyond the rhetoric of hate that threatens to divide us.

I grieve today...and, I will look into your eyes—all of your eyes—regardless of whom you voted for. I will hold onto my belief in the goodness that I have seen in you and heard from you during the course of our time together... I know that when and if governments fail, communities come together in surprising ways to help one another—no matter what...I will trust—no matter what the pundits or the politicians say—that we can find a way through these strange times together. I know that the only thing in life that doesn't change is change itself. And I am ready to stand up, like Teddy Roosevelt once said, to give what I can, with what I have, where I am at—in a spirit of service and compassion. My deepest prayer is that you will join me, no matter what you are feeling, so that we can feel—deeply and respectfully—together, and so that we can find ourselves in the common humanity of our emotion.

I grieve today...and I choose love.

Amen.