

Grace and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Good morning! When I was asked to preach on this Sunday a few weeks back, I didn't realize what a contentious week it would end up being. In the wake of an incredibly divisive election, I am humbled to be before you today. I know a lot of people on this campus and throughout the country are unsure of what the future holds. I have no plans to declare what is in store because I honestly have no idea. I'm not a trained theologian or even a religion major for that matter, but I hope that wherever you are personally today, I can speak some truth to you.

Today's scripture passage comes from the 15th Chapter of John. John 15 fits into what many biblical scholars call the "farewell discourse", ranging from Jesus's washing of the disciples' feet in chapter 13 to his arrest in chapter 18. In the chapters in between, Jesus informs the disciples that he will be leaving them soon and provides instruction on what they are to do when that happens. Shortly before today's reading, Jesus declares that Judas will betray him and Peter will deny him. He also takes time to answer several questions asked by disciples. Obviously, Jesus knows the importance of these final moments together before his death. What a gift it was for the disciples to receive this final message knowing fully well that Jesus would not be with them much longer.

The importance of farewell messages has been on my mind a lot lately. President Obama will be offering one I would expect in the upcoming months as he leaves office, following a tradition that spans all the way back to George Washington's farewell address. In Washington's farewell address, he warned of entangling alliances and more importantly for us

on this day, he spoke of the dangers of political parties as he declared that they could take away from national unity.

On a more personal level, I've been present for more farewell conversations of late thanks to my experience volunteering at a hospice-affiliated comfort care center in Mooresville. While some of the residents remain focused on making sure all things are lined up for after they pass away, I've seen others become increasingly focused on telling their loved ones that they love them and mending bridges that might have been broken down by the pressures of life. The chance to speak to loved ones before you leave them is a gift that not everyone gets, and can reveal a lot about what a person cares about.

So what does Jesus offer in his final hours with the disciples before his crucifixion? As he does so often in John, he makes an "I am" statement. In this his seventh and final I am statement, Jesus declares himself to be the True Vine and God the gardener. This metaphor is a particularly fitting one for ancient Israel. Throughout the Hebrew Scriptures, the nation of Israel is referred to as a "vine". Ezekiel 19:10 declares that "Israel is a luxuriant vine" and in Psalm 80, the psalmist rejoices that God "brought a vine out of Egypt." Yet the vine is not always said to be healthy. Jeremiah complains of the shortcomings of the Israelites and declares that they have become degenerate and turned into a wild vine. Thus to Jesus' audience, the metaphor of being a vine was a familiar one.

I don't know how many gardeners we have with us today, but I've learned from gardening with my dad that vines require a good amount of attention to successfully bear fruit.

We moved to our current house three summers ago and have tried to grow tomatoes each summer since then. I emphasize the word tried, because thus far our efforts have been met with minimal success. This summer, I learned a new gardening tactic as my dad instructed me to cut off the little branches that are taking away nutrients from the healthier, potentially fruit-bearing ones. Removing these “suckers” as he calls them ensures that even more nutrients will reach the branches that we hope will bear fruit. Thus it makes perfect sense when Jesus declares “Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit.” The Greek word here, *kathairo* is the same root that gives us the word catharsis and refers not only to pruning, but also to cleansing the branch of any other things harming its growth like insects. I don’t know what aspect of your life could use a cleaning, but I encourage each of you to examine your lives to ensure your efforts are working towards bearing fruit. That may be a small thing like starting your morning with a devotional along with reading the paper, or a big thing like a job change.

One of the most impactful pruning jobs I’ve ever seen came when my dad quit his job when I was eight. The corporate world was requiring him to take more and more time away from the family, as well as leaving him with enormously high stress levels. So, when they said he couldn’t take time off for a mission trip, he quit his job. He had no plan. But he did have the knowledge that his energy was being sucked away from bearing good fruit. He went back to school and became a high school math teacher—a job that feeds his spirit and allowed him to be around for myself and my sister. He’s now changing lives and bearing good fruit in a way he never could have imagined 15 years ago. I and his students are grateful he took the leap.

Ultimately Jesus tells us the key to bearing fruit: abiding in him and allowing him to abide in us. Now the word abide is not one that most of us run into every day. Being the good millennial I am, I googled “abide” after I read the passage. According to Merriam Webster’s site, abide means to stay or live somewhere. A quick reading of my study bible revealed the Greek word to be *meno*, which also means the remain or stay. Thus to remain in Christ is the key to bearing fruit. Jesus calls us to do more than just show up on Sunday mornings. He calls us to abide or remain in him and allow him to remain in us always. We need to stay in contact with him in order to be guided by him. I know life may pull us in many different directions, but I’ve found when I stayed centered on Jesus, I can find peace that otherwise eludes me.

Great. So it’s all laid out for us. If we abide in Jesus we’ll bear fruit and bring glory to God. In all honesty, if this was another week. I’d probably just wrap up here with a nice personal story of someone making changes in their life to bear more fruit. I would declare that God is clearly always in control and will prune us as he sees fit to maximize our fruit output. But it has not been a normal week. And I’m not done here.

You see, this week has been a trying one for many. In the wake of an election that revealed the deep divisions within our country, the election of President-elect Trump has left many people hurting—including at Davidson. Now, I know there are people on both sides of the political aisle that attend worship here. I personally consider myself a fairly moderate person when it comes to politics, having grown up with my mom’s side of the family being largely Republican and my dad’s side of the family being largely Democratic. I believe listening to

opposing sides is important because it can help us find common ground that can ultimately lead to compromise that allows us to move forward as a nation.

But I'm worried right now. As people of faith, how are we to respond to the events of this week? I turned to scripture in hopes of finding something to guide me further. Only 4 verses after the end of today's passage I found some semblance of an answer. In John 15:12-13 Jesus declares "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends."

Now I have no explicit plans to lay down my life for a friend any time soon. But I can love my friends. I can amplify their voices. I can provide a brief glimpse of their reality. I can use my privileged position today to maybe do something that will one day help them—that will one day bear good fruit. Or at least I can try. So here I go:

On election night, I saw a lot of tears. These tears were not merely those of disappointed voters whose candidate had lost an election. They were tears of fear. Fear of the unknown and in all honesty the known. The next president of the United States will be a man who has repeatedly said terrible, disrespectful things about women and immigrants. A man who has equated women's value with how attractive he finds them. A man who has explicitly supported sexual assault. A man who has proposed a national registry of Muslims, a man who has threatened mass deportations, a man who has threatened to commit war crimes by bombing civilians in the middle east. The weight of this knowledge was too much for many of my fellow students as they thought of their families and even their own safety.

Wednesday night I got a late night quesadilla at the student Union with a friend who happens to be undocumented. He was brought to the United States as a small child and has flourished in this land of opportunity—graduating as the valedictorian of his high school class. He is a gift to me, this campus, and this country. But on Wednesday he was scared. He was scared for the safety of his family. Scared for the ability to pursue the dreams he has worked so long and hard to reach. This normally jovial and light hearted spirit was burdened with concerns I could not even fathom—and then he had to go to class.

I heard other accounts of people of color who were scared of their safety and that of their family. At first, I admit, I thought these fears might have been a bit overblown. But then I switched on the news and was taken aback.

I saw reports on TV of white high schoolers calling black students “cottonpickers” and telling them to pick out a “slave number” in the wake of the election. I saw on the news Thursday the reports from Durham of graffiti put on a wall next to a restaurant owned by a black woman, that read “Black lives don’t matter and neither does your vote.” I saw reports of a planned Ku Klux Klan rally in Pelham-just north of Durham was also announced for December after the election. This is not 1960, this is 2016.

This is not to say that Donald Trump is the cause of this hatred. Who you voted for does not concern me right now. I earnestly pray that President-elect Trump will work to help all Americans work towards a better future. But to deny that this hatred exists in the hearts of our

neighbors is to deny the legitimacy of my friend's fears. It is to silence them yet again. And I refuse to do that.

So what do we do as Christians? That's up to each of you to decide. But as for me. I'm going to love and continue to abide in Christ. That's all I know to do. As the Rev Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said, Darkness cannot drive out darkness; only light can do that. Hate cannot drive out hate; only love can do that. So. I'm going to continue to love my friends and support them. I encourage each of you to reach out to your friends and neighbors that may be struggling right now and let them know that you love them. When you see intolerance speak up, as we remember Jesus called us to stand with the marginalized and oppressed. This world has a lot of hurt in it right now, but by acting to intentionally love our neighbors, we can bring the world one step closer to the kingdom. This is a lesson I learned from a friend and adopted grandmother whose funeral I attended last weekend.

Dr. Ethel Glenn was a tall woman. Standing over six feet in height. She was also a gifted speaker and earned her Ph. D. in speech communication before becoming a professor of communication studies at UNCG, where she eventually became the director of the Communication Studies department. I knew her as Ms. Ethel, a kind and involved member of the church where I grew up as she retired the year before I was born. I didn't truly know Ms. Ethel until I fell ill in 5th grade with a heart condition that left me homebound and unable to walk for 4 years. During this time, Ethel would come and sit with me while my mom ran errands. She'd read short stories to me, thoroughly defeat me in scrabble, and discuss larger questions of life. Thus when I received a call from my mom last spring that Ethel was entering

hospice care I was devastated. When I went to see her, she was no longer able to walk and appeared frailer than I had ever seen her. The one thing that she kept talking about during her moments of clarity, was her concern over the birthday gifts for the children at Washington Street Montessori school.

You see, in her retirement she had spearheaded a collaboration between our church and what was then known as Washington Street elementary, which was one of the lowest performing schools in my hometown of Greensboro. Ethel oversaw the development of a tutoring program featuring church members, school supply drives to ensure the kids had the tools needed to succeed, and birthday goody bag gatherings, that ensured every kid would receive something on their birthday. At Ethel's funeral, Washington Street school's social worker stood up and spoke of Ethel's ability to get things done in order to help others and serve God.

As I sat there with Ethel for the last time, she repeatedly said that the supplies for that month's birthday gifts had not been taken care of. My mom assured her that they had and promised to remind the person taking the gifts the next week. Even her in dying moments, Ethel's care of others shown through. Though her final message to me was not in the form of a discourse, it still left a lasting impact on me. Even as her body was failing, her greatest pursuits in life shown through: We are called to love God and to love neighbor. Ethel was driven by her faith to act boldly and love intentionally. She abided in Christ and acted out her faith to bear good fruit. I'll do my best to follow in her footsteps going forward.

I'll leave you with an excerpt from a note I received from a friend this week: I remember the night of the election, one of my friends was particularly fearful and she asked, "Where is the justice in that? Where is God right now?" While I feel similarly disillusioned and saddened, I have faith that God's justice will come through the way it often does- slowly and through the cracks. If there is anything good that has come from this election, it has been that the community at Davidson (at large) has loved harder. I have gotten more hugs from friends and classmates than I have at any other point in the semester, and I have been emboldened to tell my friends and peers how much I love them even more. I have to believe that these small acts- notes of love and gratitude from classmates, hugs from virtual strangers, "thinking about you" text messages and the like, are acts of steadfast and radical resistance.

I don't know what the future holds or how my friends will fare. But I pray God will guide our paths. I thank Him for the opportunity to take loving action on a personal and systematic level to make change.

May we go forth, to love and resist radically—abiding in Jesus so that we may bear good fruit.

In the name of the father, the son, and the holy spirit. Amen.