

**6th SUNDAY OF EASTER**  
**May 6, 2018**

Text: John 15:9-17

Theme: Abide in My Love

People with green thumbs plant anything and it prospers. I therefore have a black thumb because everything I plant dies a premature death. I do my very best to keep plants alive but to no avail. So I did my research and purchased the sturdiest plant out there (a praying hands plant). I brought it home and immediately found the instructions on how to care for it and we started our new life together.

I kept it in a location that received bright but indirect sunlight.  
I maintained the right temperature to ensure proper growth.  
I watered it every five to seven days to keep the soil moist.  
I dusted its leaves to maximize its ability to photosynthesize.  
I pruned the leaves and watched the little stubbles of new growth.  
And I thought to myself ... I finally succeeded!

But recently I noticed that the leaves were turning brown with greater frequency and no matter how many times I cut them back there was no new growth to be seen. Eventually so many leaves died that it no longer looked like a plant but only a withered mess.

In the *Gospel of John* Jesus is described in seven *I am* statements.

I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate.

I am the Good Shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life.

I am the way, the truth, and the life.

And from last week and today we hear ... I am the true vine.

Christ draws on all these different metaphors to describe himself to us. He chooses images that are familiar to us in order to explain some theological concept: bread is found on every table, we all appreciate the importance of remaining in the light, we know how gates function, and we even know what a shepherd does with his sheep. And no matter if we have green thumbs or black thumbs the connection between vines and branches is obvious. Without the proper care they grow uncontrollably and result in one big tangled mess that is very difficult to cut back and unravel.

I remember on one of our mission trips it was our job to whack away at a whole yard that was overgrown with vine branches and weeds. It took us a whole day of non-stop work to make that small space presentable again.

As with any plant, someone needs to take responsibility for its care. Someone needs to cut away the lifeless and unproductive branches and even those that are healthy must be cut back. Based on my personal challenges with a single plant, even I know that to tend and care for plant life is a long-term investment and labor intensive.

It does not take a lot of insight to see the parallels in our relationship with God and with each other. Jesus is the true vine and God is the one who plants and tends to the vine branches. We can depend on him to take care of us. Whatever pain and suffering results from the pruning process, it is redemptive rather than arbitrary. God eliminates those things in our lives that are not life-giving so that our virtues and our gifts can be cultivated instead. God wants us to thrive and grow.

Out of all the things I have learned about plants (and vines in particular) there is one fact that I remember vividly. On one of the tours of the wineries in California, we were told that the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine because that is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. So it is not good or healthy for us to be allowed to run wild. We must be pruned back and kept close to God.

I believe that is a wonderful way to understand what Jesus is telling us today when he invites us to abide with him in his love. Apart from Christ we will not be able to produce fruit. Apart from Christ we can do nothing. We must be connected to him in a real way and stay as close to him as possible.

All through this Easter season, Deacon Erin and I have been suggesting some spiritual exercises to try throughout the week. By now you should be able to say them with us.

What did we see? What did we hear? Who did we touch? We are to open our Bibles and read with an open mind to understand the Scriptures. We learned what it means to lay down our lives for others and to step up our commitments.

We are to become like Philip who enthusiastically encountered the Ethiopian and told him all about the good news of Jesus Christ. And now this week we explore what it means to stay as close as possible to God through Christ.

We preach and teach that God is with us always but this is about us always staying close to God. It is an incredible blessing to know that God is right next to us (all the time) and we have access to him (any time day or night). We can lean on him rather than on our own resources and insights. When we abide with him in his love we have new capabilities to see and respond to things differently. We can see through the eyes of Christ (because we are that close) and we can respond with humility because of all that God has done. And then we can search to discern his will because we are that close to his heart and thoughts.

But as with anything it takes practice to become adept at this. And our practice sessions will develop into healthy habits that allow us to see God in the normal course of a day and to learn how to tap into his nutrients. It means we will let God touch our lives on both good days and challenging days because we know he is that near to us.

On a practical level we are to start and end our day with God (and have thoughts of him throughout the day). Let God be the first thing we think about when we wake up. Dwell in his word. Select a Bible passage to walk with throughout the day. Record all the blessings and recount them before retiring for the night.

And when it comes time to be pruned! Admit to God that we cannot do anything apart from him. Remove ourselves from relationships and/or situations that are harmful to us. Remove ourselves from anything that does not come from God.

We talk about the death and resurrection of our Lord as being the central message of the gospel story. This is also central. This is what the Garden of Gethsemane and Good Friday are all about. God did an astonishing and costly thing to draw us in. God sent his Son to suffer and to die so that we have this intimate relationship with him. And all of this is so that we can have joy in his presence.

Jesus is the true vine and God is the one who plants and tends to its branches. Every single day God is with us and takes care of us. He used his mighty hand to lay the foundation of this earth. And now he uses that same hand to wipe our tears, embrace us, and lift us up.

Stay close and watch how we thrive and grow.

Amen