

**Sermon, 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter, April 29, 2018, Jane A. Beebe**

*“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.” (John 14:4)*

Today’s Gospel passage contains beautiful language and imagery that conveys the precise nature of our relationship with God in Jesus. The image of the vine emerges over and over again in scripture. Here is a verse from Psalm 80: “Turn again, O God of hosts; look down from heaven, and see; have regard for this vine, the stock that your right hand planted.” The vine can represent Israel itself, but also the life-giving properties of living a covenantal life: a life lived close to God. God plants the vine. Yet God does not leave the vine to its own devices. God acts as vine-grower, showing ongoing care for the vine. We, in turn, are called to “bear much fruit” and to become disciples of Jesus.

So far, this sounds lovely. However, we may be made nervous by the idea that the vine-grower may also remove branches that do not bear fruit. I take heart from the fact that this is the natural way of things: dead branches that are pruned away are thrown into a fire and burned. For the first time in praying this passage I noticed that Jesus even says of himself: “[God] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.” (John 15:2) If even Jesus has undergone this process, what have we to fear? So, what about this pruning that God does? Sometimes it is only with God’s help that those things that trouble us, that keep us from full discipleship, can be removed. Can we not trust God to

do this necessary pruning, the pruning that will result in a more fruitful life, that pruning we cannot do for ourselves?

To maintain the health of the vine it must be pruned. I am no horticulturist so I looked up the basics on how to prune grapevines. Purdue University provided a basic overview that I found helpful. It is necessary to prune the vines in order to control the grape canes so they produce more fruit. It is also done to make sure the buds have proper exposure to sunlight. The best time to prune is in the winter when the grapes are dormant. Apparently it is a mistake to prune too lightly—yet who among us does not still feel rather severely pruned by the past winter? Still, this action is *for* us; it arises out of God’s love.

Jesus is the vine that gives us abundant life. But what does it mean that Jesus calls himself the *true* vine? Apparently the Greek word for “true” in this passage is used in the superlative. This seems to imply an establishment of the truth that goes beyond what is whole and sound in itself but is transformative. The vine is a living thing, created, planted and blessed by God. As branches on this vine we partake in Jesus’ resurrection, in Jesus’ aliveness. It happens not in some magical way but from the natural flow of the sap throughout the plant. In baptism we receive that precious connection with Jesus. Our shoots are sent all the way to the river and nourished there.

This is not about the fate of an individual branch or about what branch belongs, and what branch does not. It is simply that a branch cannot live on its own. To be

fruitful it must be connected to the vine. No one branch is responsible for the all the fruitfulness. If you have looked closely at vines, you know that it is difficult to know where one branch begins and another ends. Each branch has its own value and purpose.

As branches, we do what we can to stay connected with the vine. We are dependent on the vine for its life-giving properties. It is God that is the vinedresser. We can trust God with that vine. Another favorite parable of mine is the one about the fig tree that is no longer fruitful. Rather than cutting it down right away, the gardener gives the tree another year, in the meantime supporting the possibility of growth with a careful application of manure. God is patient with us. It is a kind of loving patience that can take the long view: it can wait for new growth to come in its own time. This is the ability to abide.

The meaning of the word “abide” in the Gospel passage is “to remain.” There is a temporal quality to abiding love. It implies a willingness to commit, to stay the course, perhaps even a willingness to let go of expectations. You may be familiar with the traditional monastic vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. The Benedictines add a fourth vow: stability. The monastery where one makes life vows is the place where one remains. While this way of life may seem restrictive, for those who are called to it, it actually supports an ever-deepening spiritual life. It is one way of removing the dead branches of life’s distractions so that what is essential can reveal itself.

This passage is about what it means to be a disciple. It is about what nourishes us in our discipleship, and allows us to live in loving community. Jesus also says, “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.” (John 15:3) This too subtly suggests baptism to me. When we abide on the vine that is Jesus, we are continually replenished by God’s life-giving Word. St. Catherine of Siena speaks of the “vital sap of the vine” as a love that “inebriates the soul.” (*Dialogue*, St. Catherine of Siena) There is an organic back and forth in this “abiding” that we do. We must allow ourselves to come into proximity to that vine that supports our growth—and then abide there. To abide is to find one’s home, one’s **abode**.

The Lord into his garden comes,  
The spices yield a rich perfume,  
The lilies grow and thrive,  
The lilies grow and thrive.

Refreshing showers of grace divine,  
From Jesus flow to every vine,  
And make the dead revive,  
And make the dead revive.

O that this dry and barren ground  
In springs of water may abound,  
A fruitful soil become,  
Fruitful soil become.

The desert blossoms as the rose  
As Jesus conquers all his foes,  
And makes his people one,  
And makes his people one. —*Sacred Harp*