“God’s Pruning”

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John 15:1-8
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Jesus said, “I am the true vine” (John 15:5). Are you connected to this vine? Do you have a vital connection to Jesus?

Henry Frances Lyte was pastor of a small church in a fishing village outside Devonshire, England in the 19th century. He arrived at the church in 1824 and served faithfully for 23 years. Like many preachers of his day, he also composed hymns. “Praise My Soul, the King of Heaven” is one of his more popular compositions.

He contracted tuberculosis in 1844. Although his health over the next three years was compromised, he persevered. When he could hold out no longer, he preached his farewell sermon on September 4, 1847. He was so weak that he had to be helped to the pulpit and could barely speak above a whisper. He urged his congregation that morning to face death resolutely and confidently.

After worship, he rested and walked the beach. Later that day, he shared a hymn he had written with his wife. Each verse ended with the refrain “Abide with Me.”

Lyte died three weeks later and the hymn was first sung at his funeral. How appropriate were the words, “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.” The closing line is especially poignant, “In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.” The hymn still resonates with those who know their need of God.

The hymn “Abide with Me” was sung as part of the opening ceremonies for the 2012 Summer Olympics in London. A Scottish singer, Emeli Sande, sang it accompanied by a dance troupe. It was sung prior to the parade of nations, but it was cut by NBC when it broadcast the opening ceremonies. Why am I not surprised?

The image of abide is drawn from the 15th chapter of John’s gospel. Jesus picks up on a common sight around Jerusalem. As he and his disciples walked the Judean hillside, they would pass row after row of grapevines. Jesus never passed up an opportunity to teach by object lesson. While evoking memories of lush vineyards he declared, “I am the true vine” (15:1).
In the *Chronicles of Narnia*, Jill, who is a newcomer to the land of Narnia, comes upon a stream. As she is about to kneel down to drink, she sees a nearby lion watching her every move. “Are you not thirsty?” the lion asks.

“I’m dying of thirst,” Jill says. Jill has heard rumors of talking animals in Narnia, but now she experiences it for herself.

“Then drink,” the lion says.

“Would you mind going away while I do?” Jill asks. The lion answers with only a look and a growl. As Jill contemplated its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the steam drives her nearly frantic.

“Will you promise not to do anything to me if I do come?” said Jill.

“I make no promise,” said the lion. Jill is so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she has moved a step closer. “Do you eat girls?” she asks tentatively.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the lion. The lion wasn’t being boastful or angry. He just said it.

“I dare not come and drink,” Jill says.

“Then you will die of thirst,” the lion says.

“Oh, dear,” says Jill, coming a step nearer. “I suppose I must go and look for another stream.”

“There is no other stream,” the lion announces. This lion, called Aslan, is used by C.S. Lewis in his children’s story to represent the figure of Jesus Christ. Christ is the only stream. The living water has only one source.

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” Jesus announces to his disciples (15:5). Branches need to stay connected to the vine; that’s how they grow.
“Abide in me and I will abide in you,” Jesus says (15:4). Abide is an old fashioned word. It means to remain or stay connected to something. Jesus references this same word 11 times in this 15th chapter. Maybe you’ve heard me say that repetition is the Bible’s way of underlining. Jesus says, in every way he knows, how believers must stay connected to the vine.

I’m struck by the reciprocal nature of Jesus’ words, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” This abiding is reciprocal so long as we remember that the initiative is on God’s side. We are able to abide in Jesus because he abides in us.

You may recall from English grammar that prepositions function as connecting words to specify the relationship between two objects. The preposition “in” is designed to express place and location. You are invited to live in me as I live in you.

Are you connected to Jesus? Do you have a vital connection to this true vine?

We want to help you become connected to Jesus. That’s why we are inviting you to participate in a 30-day exercise. Our plan is to read a daily devotional for the next 30 days entitled Apprenticeship with Jesus. Each day consists of a story, a reflection and an apprenticeship activity. Its author, Gary Moon, writes in his introduction that the reason Christianity has an image problem among those under 30 is because those who identify themselves as Christians exhibit a lack of spiritual transformation.

We talk a lot in this church about establishing a spiritual growth plan. We urge you to order your daily and weekly life to help you become better apprentices of Jesus. This devotional is designed to help you center your life in daily prayer and Scripture meditation. Our goal, pure and simple, is to help you become connected to Jesus.

Jesus’ purpose in all this talk about vines and abiding is made clear in verse 5: “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit” (15:5). Six times, in a span of eight verses, Jesus speaks about bearing fruit for God.
Fruitfulness for God is a common New Testament image. Paul urges fellow believers, in his letter to the Colossians, to be filled with God’s Spirit so that they will “bear fruit in every good work” (Colossians 1:6). He enumerates, in his epistle to the Galatians, nine fruits of the Holy Spirit, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (5:22-23).

Since Jesus is talking about grapevines, the corresponding fruit are grapes used in the production of wine. Caring for grapevines, called viticulture, involves hard work. Grapevines have a tendency to grow wild unless they are pruned. Vinedressers, as they are called, must periodically prune dead undergrowth and clean live branches. The process of pruning is known as cleansing the vine. How ironic, in verse 3, that Jesus speaks about the cleansing power of God’s word.

Grapevines produce new branches, called sucker shoots, at the base of the vine and at the connecting point where branches attach to the vine. These sucker shoots will produce leaves but never become mature enough to grow fruit. As their name implies, they suck nutrients away from the healthy, fruit producing branches of the vine. If these sucker shoots remain on the vine, they will stunt the growth of the healthy branches and thereby produce smaller, inferior grapes.

Jesus declares at the outset, “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser” (15:1). God’s role, comparable to a vigilant vinedresser, is to periodically prune the vine. Just as farmers prune their grapevines, so God prunes us. You and I do not relish the thought of being pruned by God. Yet God’s pruning is never vindictive. God prunes us so that we will become more fruitful.

This pruning might explain why we don’t always get what we ask for in prayer. This pruning would illuminate why some situations don’t turn out just the way we planned. I don’t mean to imply that all human suffering is the result of God’s pruning. Suffering is a far more complex subject than to glibly announce that all human suffering is attributable to God’s pruning. Yet it can be supported Biblically that God uses pain and hardship to get our attention and motivate us toward change.
Being loved by God doesn’t mean we are coddled by God. God’s pruning is necessary for our spiritual growth. Otherwise, we would be all leaves and no fruit.

Let me return to this matter of why we talk so much about meditating on Scripture as part of your spiritual growth plan. I have found through the years that the daily practice of reading Scripture has a pruning effect in my life. You see, I don’t merely read the Bible. In actuality, the Bible reads me. As I search the Scriptures, it lays bare my self-serving tendencies and mindless consumption. The Bible exposes my bad habits and destructive attitude. The writer of Hebrews likens Scripture to a two-edged sword that cuts to the heart (4:12).

Are you connected to Jesus? Why not resolve, in this New Year, to become better connected to Jesus? Perhaps there are sucker shoots robbing you of your vitality and joy. What you are doing may be sucking life out of you and killing you softly. Branches must stay connected to the vine. Stay connected to Jesus!