



Kumiyoshi Terada, *Vine and Branches*

John 15:1-8

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

"Abiding in Christ"

They cut me down and I leapt up high:
I am the life that'll never, never die;
I'll live in you if you'll live in me:
I am the Lord of the Dance said he.

(Shaker tune, Lord of the Dance, vs. 5)

In her commentary on our gospel reading, Rev. Matthews wrote: 'John uses the image of a vine and its branches, to help—and challenge—that early community, and ours today, to claim our close relationship with Jesus. In Jesus' time, people would have been familiar with the vine metaphor; it appears in the Hebrew Scriptures several times to describe Israel. But even if contemporary Christians have never tended a vineyard, most of us have seen a grapevine at one time or another. Looking closely, we see the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in intricate patterns of tight curls that make it impossible to tell where one branch starts or another one ends. This is not just intricate; it's intimate, and the vine shares with its branches the nutrients that sustain it, the life force of the whole plant. Even closer than the shepherd there on the hillside, this vine is *one* with the branches (UCC Sermon Seeds, 4/29/18).

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.

(Abide With Me, vs. 1)

In John's writings, 'love is at the heart of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Love is the measure of faithfulness' (ibid). The central verb in today's passage, however, is abide. In verse 4, Jesus invites his followers into an intimate, personal relationship with Jesus, the vine, saying: 'Abide in me, as I abide in you.' To vine growers, the metaphor is a compelling one which becomes one for non-gardeners like me when I learn that: "The best grapes are found close to the vine, 'where the nutrients are the most concentrated.'" In the Message, Eugene Peterson translates abide in verse 4 in this way: "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." For souls without homes, family, and friends, it's faith's prayer time with Jesus for never feeling alone, and for being sustained with the grace and strength that we need in our lives.

Gracious spirit, dwell with me
And with words that help and heal .
Would thy life in mine reveal,
And with actions bold and meek
Would for Christ my Savior speak.

(Gracious Spirit, Dwell With Me, vs. 1)

When Jesus finished the Passover meal, his Last Supper with his disciples (the supper in which he washed the feet of his disciples, gave his commandments on Love, and asked them to remember him in the breaking of the bread and drinking the cup of forgiveness), he said to them: "Rise, let us be on our way" (14:31b). After that, he gave his farewell speech to his disciples, which was full of instructions, exhortations, and prayer. He started out his first exhortation with one of his "I AM" sayings. He said of himself and of God: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." In the short exhortation about abiding in Jesus and abiding in his words that follows, Jesus mentions bearing fruit four more times. Bearing fruit, bearing fruit, bearing fruit,

bearing fruit. After hearing it so many times, we begin to get the message that both activities, rising up and get moving and staying rooted in Jesus, are dependent on abiding in Jesus, the real vine. "Bearing fruit" notes Biblical scholar Sarah Henrich, "does not create disciples, bearing fruit reveals disciples" (ibid).

I was there to hear your borning cry,
I'll be there when you are old,
I rejoiced the day you were baptized,
To see your life unfold.

(I Was There To Hear Your Borning Cry, vs. 4)

The gospel writer John tells the story about Jesus' baptism differently than Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In John 1:29-34 he wrote: The next day John (The Baptist) saw Jesus coming toward him and said, "Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world! This is the one I meant when I said, 'A man who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.' I myself did to know him, but the reason I came baptizing with water was that he might be revealed to Israel. Then John gave this testimony: "I saw the Spirit come down from heaven as a dove and remain on him. I would not have known him, except that the one who sent me to baptize with water told me, 'The man on whom you see the Spirit come down and remain is he who will baptize with the Holy Spirit. I have seen and I testify that this is the Son of God.'

In our world of multitasking and being pulled in a dozen different directions, abiding in Jesus, and abiding in his word is not something that we can accomplish on our own. That's why I like John's version of Jesus' baptism because I have faith that when we corporately pray, "Come, Holy Spirit come, let the Love of Jesus abide in us, and the peace of Christ which passes all our understanding find a home in your church", we will bear fruit just as Jesus said in his closing his exhortation: 'If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples' (John 15:8).