

“The True Vine”

John 15:1-8

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With the arrival of Labor Day, summer has already begun its long, gradual descent into autumn. Gardens, which for months have offered a vast array of colors and provided an abundance of flavorful vegetables now find themselves on the downslope of their lifecycles. Although I was born and raised in a state nicknamed the “Garden State”--a state more befitting of the title the “Oil Refinery State”--I’ve been blessed with anything BUT a green thumb. A case in point: Thirty years ago, I served an inner-city church in Irvington, NJ and lived in a manse that had a small plot of ground in the backyard which previous ministers had used for a garden. I was convinced that if THEY could do it, so could I. Hence, I removed all the rocks and weeds, tilled it until the darker earth underneath came to the surface, mixed bags of mulch into it, sprinkled Miracle Gro on top of it, and then purchased sixty tomato seedlings which I planted approximately three inches apart from each another. Every evening, I made sure it was watered thoroughly, all the while anticipating the tasty salads and pasta dishes that would last me through the season.

However, as summer approached, it was becoming apparent that something was wrong. The plants were not only NOT growing, they were DYING on me. When I asked my neighbor, a farmer in her own right, what was going on with them, she laughed and said that I had planted too many of them too close to each other for them to survive in such a small area, that they were robbing each other of all the nutrients they required to survive. She predicted that none of them would last and she eventually proved right about that. Then with a wink she said, “Dave, you stick to growing churches and leave the tomatoes to the rest of us.”

I had much better luck growing things after I married Rose- a natural gardener whose two great passions in life have always been her flowers and her birds. Eventually, I took a church in Indiana just outside of Chicago where we bought a piece of property an acre in size which we called home. In the backyard, where there was a large fenced-in area containing an above-ground pool and patio area, we got rid of the pool and transformed the space into a large garden that would eventually yield over twenty different kinds of vegetables and fruits. We would often spend our mornings drinking coffee back there- amazed by the size and number of the tomatoes and zucchinis, the beans and the eggplants, the kale and the strawberries among others. We even canned our own tomato sauce and what we didn’t use for ourselves, we gave away to friends and neighbors. We also provided plenty of vegetables to the “Soup and Serenity” ministry of our church- a free hot luncheon for the whole community that was offered every Thursday at noon. For the first time in my life, I felt like a real farmer living off the land.

Well, our New Testament lesson ALSO involves growth (or lack thereof) but first a little background. It is the night that our Lord would be betrayed and arrested. He has just concluded the Last Supper in the Upper Room and is now, along with several of his disciples, heading through Jerusalem towards the Mount of Olives where the Garden of Gethsemane is located. It

is speculated that along the way, they pass by the great doors of the Temple over which an exquisite carving of a great vine, all covered in gold leaf, was prominently displayed. It was the symbol of Israel, the Chosen People of God, and every Jew was well acquainted with its significance. With so little time remaining, I can see Jesus pausing before it to give his followers one last teaching regarding his ministry and his mission. He tells them he is the TRUE vine in contrast to the one emblazoned over the Temple, and that his Father is the vinedresser, the gardener who cuts and prunes. If they abided in him, they would inevitably bear much fruit. At times, they would have to be pruned back to produce even more yield while every branch that FAILED to bear fruit would be lopped off and thrown into the fire.

By calling himself the TRUE vine, Christ is declaring that God's Chosen People was no longer to be the special privilege of a single race or nation as Israel had enjoyed but that it now belonged to ANY person—Jew OR Gentile--whose life was united to his own. He repeats this idea of abiding in him eleven times within the span of just a few verses, insisting that APART from him, they would remain barren and never result in ANY fruit. This theme of “abiding” represented the very essence of what it meant to be a TRUE follower. It said that unless one's life was intimately connected to his OWN, and his “sap”—that is, his life and teachings and spiritual energy—was allowed to flow INTO and THROUGH that person, he or she would never be of any use to Jesus or his kingdom. Like a dead plant, it would be uprooted and then used for the only thing it was good for- to be burned for heat.

He never tells them HOW they get to abide with him because as he informs them, they are ALREADY connected to him. He says in verse 3, “You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you,” meaning his teachings and truths have been received by his disciples and are taking root in their hearts. His word is already at work pruning and cleansing them inwardly. It is now only a matter of time before REAL fruit is produced by their lives. THEIR task is simply to allow that process to continue, to not let anything impede or interfere with its progress so that much fruit WILL eventually come forth.

This morning, two thousand years later, these same words are now addressed to US, ALSO his Chosen People, urging US to take note of the fact that as we are ALREADY connected to Christ, the most important thing we can do with OUR lives is to “abide” in him. That word “abide” suggests that we are to “remain,” to “stay,” to “live,” to “dwell,” to “last,” to “endure,” and to “continue” in our relation to him. Because we are ALREADY incorporated onto the vine, the issue becomes one of what is expected of us now that we ARE members of him- of his Body, his Church. We have been grafted onto the root which is Jesus Christ and so his life now courses through our OWN. All that is truly good IN us and all work that is of eternal value BY us is produced by the power of the indwelling Christ who energizes us and sustains us by virtue of his union WITH us. If we might paraphrase Jesus's command, he says in effect “Abide in me. Cling to me. Stick fast to me. Live the life of close and intimate communion with me. Get nearer and nearer to me. Roll every burden on me. Cast your whole weight on me and never let go of your hold on me- NOT EVEN FOR A MOMENT!”

To “abide” suggests a full surrender on our part, an act of total trust. It means to fully yield oneself up to God and then to rest afterwards in our Lord's presence. In this way, we enter

into the PEACE of God, into that great calm in the midst of life's chaos and turmoil which gives us strength for every duty, and courage for every struggle. To borrow an image I'll address more fully in NEXT week's sermon, it is to become one of Christ's sheep living in his perpetual care, trusting in the Good Shepherd's ability to lead us, to provide for us, and to protect us in the midst of every possible situation. To "abide" does not involve any work on our part, in the sense of contributing in some way to our own salvation, but it IS to allow him to do all that FOR us and IN us and THROUGH us. OUR part is simply to yield ourselves to him on a daily basis and CONTINUE trusting him. That is why "grace" is the most profound tenet of our faith. At its very core is the truth that we are saved, not by anything WE can do but by God's efforts FOR US, especially when we are so undeserving of it. We can only accept it and then spend the rest of our lives giving God gratitude for it.

You've already heard by now of how although I grew up in the church, it was not something I took very seriously until just prior to my junior year in college. As some point, I finally got tired of fighting God and, in an act of surrender, got down on my knees and, in what was probably the first honest prayer I had ever prayed, said, "Lord, I don't even know if you EXIST, but if you DO, please help me." When I got up off my knees, I knew that I knew that I knew there WAS a God and that this God would give me all the help and guidance I would ever need. By the end of that week, I had no doubt that I was being called into ministry, and for the past fifty years, I have sought to remain true to that call.

What you DON'T know is that for the first six months after making that rather brash commitment, I believed that being a Christian meant nothing more than keeping a reasonable facsimile of the Ten Commandments. I thought that if you basically remained a good person who did not lie, cheat, steal, commit adultery, or curse God, you would eventually get into heaven. I began going to church three to four times a week for worship and various Bible studies, and would often pray for hours on end, thinking that such mental and spiritual exertion would help make me a better Christian. I was very zealous for my faith in the hope that I would gain God's favor and eventually earn enough credits to spend eternity with him and my family. At the SAME time, I was growing increasingly discouraged because I found that I COULDN'T keep all those Commandments, that every day I was breaking them- if not in deed then in thought. There were days in which I would feel SO discouraged that I almost abandoned my faith entirely. Sure, I believed that Jesus was there for me but I felt it was MY obligation to keep my hand in his, that it was MY responsibility for maintaining and preserving this special relationship and not HIS.

But then one day, I attended a Bible study on the book of Romans. When we got to chapter seven, the teacher talked about St. Paul's mistaken belief that the Law would save him and his futile attempts to try to fulfill all its precepts- in effect, trying to save HIMSELF. The result was that he got more and more disheartened until in a moment of extreme desperation, he threw his hands up and exclaimed, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of sin and death?" In the next instant, he realized that he was not saved by keeping the Law but rather by faith in the one who sacrificed his life on the Cross FOR him- Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did it all FOR him and all HE had to do was just ACCEPT it- that was ALL. For the rest of his life, he would live by "faith" rather than the "Law," and allow God to produce "fruit"

through his life rather than trying to generate “works” which he thought would save him. Each day was another opportunity to practice the art of surrendering his life, his will over to God, and to no longer worry about whether he had fulfilled this particular commandment or not. God had already done everything FOR him and all he had to do was accept it and live a life of gratitude and thanksgiving for it.

That Bible study changed my life. I discovered that night how I had gotten it terribly wrong, that I’d had it all backwards. You see, I was mistaken in believing I had to cling to Jesus with all my strength every moment of every day, that my relationship to God lay exclusively in the exertion of MY faith and MY will when the reality was that I NEVER had God’s hand TO BEGIN WITH- rather, God had MINE and, furthermore, God had promised to never let go of it, EVER! As a result, I have devoted my life and ministry in trying to discover ever more deeply the meaning of God’s love and grace for the church and the world. I no longer keep a ledger containing a list of all my good deeds or even my moral failures nor do I WORRY about such things. My credo for the past half century which I have written in the frontispiece of my Bible comes straight from St. Augustine who once wrote, “Dilige Et Quod Vis Fac” which translated means “Love God and do what you will.” In other words, just love God and leave the rest to Him. Hence, I’ve spent the past five decades just learning how to “abide,” that is, learning how to “rest” in my relationship with God knowing that God loves me more than I can ever love him and that God can care for me so much better than I can even care for MYSELF.

You see, there is a great difference between “works” and “fruit.” When we think that WE are the ones primarily responsible for our relationship with God, we become preoccupied with how many “works” or “good deeds” we can perform to maintain that relationship. But “fruit” is the natural by-product of that relationship- it proceeds spontaneously and unconsciously from out of our hearts as a direct response to God’s love and activity for us and in us. And it is the fruit we produce which will tell us and others whether we are in fact connected to the root, to Jesus Christ or not. As we used to sing years ago in Sunday School, “And they’ll know we are Christian by our love, by our love; yes they’ll know we are Christians by our love,” so will people know whether our faith, our relationship to God is genuine or not by the life we live and the words we speak. St. Paul once described such fruit in his Epistle to the Galatians as love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such there is no law. However, if our heart and attitudes are dark and angry and unforgiving, then obviously there is a problem in our relationship with God and we then have to look to him for help in dealing with it.

Still, we have responsibilities as a Christian if we are ever going to MATURE in our faith. If we abide in Christ, then there are some things we need to do which are ESSENTIAL for helping us to strengthen that connection. If we abide in him, we will want to LIVE IN HIS WORD for by studying the Scriptures, we learn of God’s promise to love us with an everlasting love and how nothing will ever separate us from either his presence or his love. Through the PRACTICE OF PRAYER, we convey our humble dependency on God and God’s grace, learning to despair of even the BEST of our own efforts. By ASSEMBLING WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD FOR WORSHIP AND THE SACRAMENTS, we celebrate that relationship and express our unity together through his Holy Spirit. And through our COMMITMENT TO

SOCIAL ACTION, to changing the sinful structures in our society that continue to exploit and oppress its weaker members, we demonstrate how Christ's love and concern is for the ENTIRE world and not just limited to his Church. As we participate in such activities, we increasingly discover the nature and breadth of his love and his grace for us and this in turn STRENGTHENS our connection to him. We learn how we can more faithfully share it with others who are EQUALLY loved by God and needing to recognize it for their OWN lives.

I wish to end my sermon this morning with a short passage from the most famous sermon by perhaps the most influential religious thinker of the 20th century- Paul Tillich's "You Are Accepted." More than any other sermon, it succinctly yet powerfully illustrates for me what it means to "abide" in Christ:

...Sometimes at that moment a wave of light breaks into our darkness, and it is as though a voice were saying: 'You are accepted. You are accepted, accepted by that which is greater than you, and the name of which you do not know. Do not ask for the name now; perhaps you will find it later. Do not try to do anything now; perhaps later you will do much. Do not seek for anything; do not perform anything; do not intend anything. SIMPLY ACCEPT THE FACT THAT YOU ARE ACCEPTED!' If that happens to us, we experience grace. After such an experience we may not be better than before, and we may not believe more than before. But everything is transformed. In that moment, grace conquers sin, and reconciliation bridges the gulf of estrangement. And nothing is demanded of this experience, no religious or moral or intellectual presupposition, nothing but ACCEPTANCE.

Church, THAT for me is what it means to "abide with Christ." We don't ever have to strive to remain connected with him for he holds OUR hand and assures us he will never let go of it. All WE have to do is to simply accept it and then lead lives that reflect our gratitude to God for it. It is waking up and discovering that we are ALREADY forgiven, that we have ALREADY become God's children and heirs of an imperishable inheritance, that we are in fact NEW creatures. We did not earn it; we did not work for it- we could only accept it as a free gift from God. And if we truly BELIEVE that, with our heart as well as our head; if we allow that truth to work its way deep down into our soul and our spirit, then we are promised a very special peace which the Bible says is beyond all reason or understanding; a serenity that will enable us to surmount every situation, REGARDLESS of how painful or tragic it may seem.

So when the doctor tells you he has found a malignant tumor in your breast; or when you've just learned that the company you've given so much to for the past twenty-five years will suddenly close and other job prospects look dim; or when your spouse has informed you that he or she is leaving you for your best friend; or when your son says he is being shipped overseas to serve in a part of the world already riven with conflict; or when your healthcare costs already exceed your savings; or when your daughter has just been arrested on drug charges; or when a parent has been diagnosed with Parkinson's or Alzheimer's Disease- our God says to us: "Do not fear! Come unto me and abide. Take your rest here beside me. As hard as it may be to believe, trust that I've got everything under control. I will be there for you in the details. Know that I've got your best interests at heart. Be assured that I love you with an everlasting love and nothing will ever separate you from either my presence or my love- of THAT I PROMISE." Amen.