

"Abide in Me"

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"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples." (John 15:1-8)

When I was young, and we would go visit my grandparents in Iron Station over in Gaston County, I would always go out and check on the vine. I didn't yet have a feel for when the muscadines would be ripe, that it was only in the fall. So, regardless of the time of year I would always have the same hope... that there would be big bluish-black orbs hanging all over it... that I would be able to pick a few and put the broken stem end in my mouth, and squeeze that sweet delicious pulp onto my tongue. I didn't even mind the fact that I'd have to spit four or five seeds out before I swallowed. I got pretty good at separating them out.

The vine seemed huge to me then... 12-15 feet long, five or six feet wide. It covered a metal frame in my grandparents' backyard, out near the garden. The vine had at least four different vine stems that rose up out of the ground, but after a few feet of climbing you couldn't tell where one branch ended and another began. It became one big mass of stems, leaves, and grapes. It was no longer a collection of individual branches – it was one, integrated, interconnected community.

This is the image that the gospel uses to describe what it means to abide in Christ. The vine is a network of connectedness —what Martin Luther King, Jr. would call “an inescapable network of mutuality.” “Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly,” King wrote. “I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.” “*This is,*” he concluded, “*the interrelated structure of reality.*”¹ And so it is with the vine. Our life in Christ is not marked by individuality, but rather in commonality, interdependence, and sharing.

A few weeks ago over Spring Break, Molly and I took a road trip up to the northeast. Toward the end of one exhausting day in Boston, our bus tour circled around to the area around Fenway Park, which I learned was named for the surrounding marsh and parkland known as the Back Bay Fens. In 1942, as the Roosevelt Administration worked to mobilize the country for war readiness, a large portion of the Fens was designated as a “Victory Garden.” Scattered across the country, gardens like this one accounted for nearly half of all the vegetables produced in the United States during World War II. After the war,

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1963), p. 72.



Bostonians lobbied to keep the gardens going. Today, more than 500 individual garden plots, covering 7 and a half acres of urban land, are tended by a community of volunteers.² Plots are assigned each year to residents within the City of Boston. Some families have held their plots for generations, and the waiting list is always long.

Looking out from the bus over these eclectic little tracts of land, the thing that struck me the most was their open, inviting character. Each plot was as unique as the persons tending them. Plots were fenced, but most of the gates were open. Many have provided little tables and seating areas that invite the public to come in and take a seat. Sometimes fruits and vegetables are openly offered; if not, a generally-accepted morality knows to respect the work cultivators and leave their growing food undisturbed. For the most part, these rules of honor and hospitality are based on the honor system... they are implicit, but sacrosanct.

Abiding within the living vine of Christ, John says, is much like this. Such a life can only be shared with generosity, gratitude, and mutual respect. It is something that we can only do together.

But an even deeper truth of the living vine relates to the source of that shared life. You cannot bear fruit, Christ says, “*unless you abide in me.*” “*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.*” But “*apart from me,*” Christ warns, “*you can do nothing.*” The image of the vine is rooted in an imperative verb, a command. “***Abide*** in me as I abide in you.” Stay with me, Christ says. Continue with me. Dwell in me.

The idea is that our life, as the body of Christ, must be rooted in Christ in the same way that the branches of a vine are rooted in the vine, which in turn is rooted in the ground. The theologian Paul Tillich, who served as a military chaplain in the German army during World War I, became convinced that Christianity had become unrooted. He felt as if he were watching age-old conceptions of God die on the battlefield. When the war was over, as he did some of the most influential theological work of the 20th Century, Tillich would begin to describe God as “the ground of all Being.” The idea is that everything we are – our very life and existence, not only comes from God, but remains completely connected with God in every way. Nothing, including us, exists apart from God.³

On Thursday night I was at a dinner of about sixteen people, most of whom are pastors or seminary students. It’s a group of Presbyterians who love the church, who not only try to encourage each other in our service to the church but to help cultivate the next generation of faith leaders. One of the seminary students who attended shared with the group his honest reflections on his experience growing up in the church. “Church was nice,” he said, “but it was always sort of to the side. It was just something I did, but I never really thought about it as being something nourishing or life-giving.” It was only recently, as he began to think about God and the body of Christ in new ways, that he had begun to experience the reality of God in the community. His experience is consistent with the trends that Paul Tillich had begun to observe many years earlier, when he suggested that we as Christians, must begin to reimagine the idea of God on high, a being that is

² <http://fenwayvictorygardens.org/learn/history/>

³ Diana Butler Bass, *Grounded: Finding God in the World – A Spiritual Revolution* (New York: HarperOne, 2015), Kindle Version, pp. 17-8. See also Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-1963), 238.

somewhere “up there,” and replace that idea with images of a God “who is not apart from us, but who is the very core and ground of all that is.”⁴

Sadly, we don’t seem to be doing a very good job as the church of cultivating those real experiences. More and more, people of all ages, the old and the young, are choosing to stay away from church. It is not that they have stopped believing in God, because they do believe. Nor have they quit seeking spiritual depth or meaning, because they *are* seeking. They are just finding that inspiration in other places. Many of them say that there is a widening gulf or disconnect between the existing structures of religion and the ways that they experience God. Stated another way, some of the aging practices of church are no longer rooted in God in ways that we can see, hear, taste, and touch.

If we are going to bridge this divide, we have to keep this image of the vine central to our understanding of what it means to be a follower of Christ. We cannot be the body of Christ if church feels like it did for that seminary student: if it is something kind of off to the side... something nice that we do... but not anything that feels life-giving or nourishing. The symbolism of the living vine reminds us that we have a need — not just a spiritual need, but a physical, emotional, ontological need — to be rooted in Christ... to recognize that he is our source of life... that without him we are lost.

Today, our confirmands are completing a process that began with their baptisms, an experience that we have always understood as a mystical joining or grafting of our lives onto the living vine of Christ. Ever since John Knox first penned the Scots Confession, we Presbyterians have proclaimed that “we assuredly believe that by Baptism we are engrafted into Christ Jesus, to be made partakers of his righteousness,” and that in this sacrament “Christ Jesus is so joined with us that he becomes the very nourishment and food of our souls.”⁵ In confirmation, these young people make today a conscious, mature, and informed choice to be grounded in Christ, to lean upon Christ and depend upon him for their very lives.

There is much in the life of faith that we cannot choose. There is much that we cannot do for ourselves. But as one Christian mystic has said, we can choose “the abiding place of our soul.”⁶ May we, as individual branches, and as the church that remains as the body of Christ in the world, make the choice to abide in the living vine... to root ourselves in a mutual, interconnected community that is not just something we do on the side, but a vibrant reality grounded in the God who gives structure, meaning, and life to everything we do and everything we are. “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,*” Jesus says, “*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.*”

In the name of the Father, and the Son and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

⁴ Bass, p. 31.

⁵ *The Scots Confession*, 3.21.

⁶ Meda Stamper, “Commentary on John 15:1-8,” www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2434