

“To Abide or Not to Abide? That is the Question”

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John 15:1-8

As we are joined in authentic, fruitful relationship to Christ, we become a vine that flourishes and grows, even in moments of pruning.

I will admit that I have found it hard to study John 15 this week without getting distracted by the thoughts of the vines and branches growing at the back of my yard. I can't help it. Every time I read, "I am the vine, and you are the branches," all I can think about is the excessive honeysuckle growing in our backyard. Like every other place in Missouri, bush honeysuckle has invaded our yard – assisted in part by some neighbors who apparently believe it is free landscaping. It started with a few shoots making their way from their yard into ours, and now we have what could charitably be called a major infestation. I am looking into the purchase of napalm. In a fit of rage the other day, I took Dean's chainsaw prepared to do battle. The battle became a short skirmish as the vines became hopelessly entangled in the chainsaw.

Needless to say, Jesus' words "I am the vine, and you are the branches" feel a bit like salt being rubbed into the wounds on my arms from my battles with honeysuckle.

I will win, however. I will win not only out of determination but also because the next time I engage the honeysuckle I will not only be pruning, but I will begin preaching, armed with chainsaw, clippers, handsaws and Jesus' words from John: "he removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit!"

My father had more patience for gardening than I have. Our yard in California was not filled with invasive honeysuckle, but with fruit trees and rose bushes. Dad would come home from work, and tend to the roses. I have read books about caring for roses that instructs you to use a carefully cleaned pruning tool to avoid infection. Dad did not read those books. Dad would prune the roses with his pocket knife, the same knife he'd use to surgically remove splinters, trim finger nails, open envelopes, cut fruit or whatever else needed to be done around home. He would carefully trim and prune, and then tell me, "Sometimes you need to cut off branches in order to encourage more growth."

I am fairly certain that Dad had read fewer books about theology than he had about gardening, but I imagine he would agree with Jesus' words to the disciples. "I am the true vine," says Jesus. Not an invasive species that threatens to ruin the garden, nor a weed that resembles the good vine. Jesus describes himself as the vine, and God as the vinedresser who works meticulously, tirelessly at shaping, supporting, and pruning the vine.

This passage is set among Jesus' farewell speech to the disciples. His speech as long as the vine he imagines, with nearly as many twists and intertangling passages. It comes at the end of an emotionally charged evening. Repeatedly he has told them to not let their hearts be troubled—

which, of course, is a signal that their hearts are indeed troubled. He has been speaking on and on and on, and still, they do not understand.

“I am the vine, you are the branches,” he tells them now. Perhaps a gardening metaphor might work. It is the last of the famous “I am” passages in John’s Gospel.” He is describing relationships that are rich, vital, and above all else mutually connected. He spells out this image of the new community, making it clear that it is primarily modelled in the relationship that he shares with God. And like any good dresser of vines, God the vine grower tends to the vineyard carefully, pruning away the dead places so that the vines might bear as much fruit as possible.¹

All the way through John’s Gospel Jesus has been drawing people near to himself so that they would experience life in abundance. This is what he meant when he called Nicodemus to be born anew, and when he offered the Samaritan woman the gift of living water. This is what he meant when he calmed the storm, and when he broke bread in the wilderness.

Throughout John’s gospel, Jesus has been saying over and over again what he now simply summarizes by saying, “Abide in me as I abide you.”

Relationship matters. When Sondra Matthei was researching a book on Christian faith formation, she spent an afternoon talking with three women who had been raised as Christians, but for one reason or another had stopped attending church. One had simply drifted away, another described herself as spiritual but not necessarily religious, and another had stopped believing entirely. Sondra probed the women about their experiences. What had they valued about church? Why were they not attending? What had happened?

In each case, she discovered that once the women began raising questions about faith and the church’s traditions, their questions were left unheard. Dr. Matthei concludes, “I realized that hearing is the beginning of authentic relationship.”² It is, she says, only when we our voices are heard that we discover the basic trust that builds authentic, lasting, relationship.

Too often, however, instead of listening, we forget that our role is not to cut away the branches. We are not to take out our rusty pocketknives and prune away branches we believe are less entitled or less fruitful. That is God’s job—our job is to abide.

Jesus says, “Abide with me,” but we have not tolerated those whose identities, beliefs, or experiences differ from ours. Jesus says, “Remain in me,” but we live in an environment which thrives on autonomy and not mutuality. We have preferred our rugged individualism to the abundant mutuality Jesus offers.

This has always been a challenge to the church, and it seems like it is an even greater challenge now. In the wake of the pandemic, the question becomes, “To abide or not abide?”

Take a moment to allow the truth of those words to resonate within you. Abide with me, as I abide with you, for apart from me you can do nothing. Jesus’ words describe a community of

¹ I’m indebted to Karoline Lewis, “John” for these images.

² Sondra Higgins Matthei, “Formation in Faith,” (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2008).

believers whose lives blend together in love. The central vine supplies the nutrients and sustains the growth to the lateral branches.

At its worst, the pandemic has tried to prune the infrastructure of community. Everything we have done; every part of our lives has been restructured and changed. And I'm sorry to say, the bad news is that the changes and restructuring are continuing.

We have experienced painful pruning.

Last July a Christian-based research group showed that in the early days of the pandemic, almost one in three practicing Christians stopped attending church either in person or online. Most churches, even those who have been in person for quite a while, have not seen attendance push back to the pre-pandemic numbers. And some think maybe as many as one in five persons will have dropped out of church permanently.³

But at its *best*, the pandemic has also released tremendous waves of creativity. We have learned how to remain connected to each other in new, and perhaps lasting ways. The joy of seeing loved ones on Zoom, the increased phone calls, the clanging of pots and pans to cheer healthcare workers—these are all reminders of the ways we have learned to abide. There are signs of renewed interest in faith and spirituality – and the number of persons who “attend” our worship has continued to grow.

The question for us as disciples of Jesus Christ is this: will we continue to abide, or will we imagine that faith is some sort of do-it-yourself project that does not require becoming part of a community.

Yes, it feels as though much has been lost. Pruning stings. But there is so much which is about to emerge.

I'm indebted to Roger Nishioka, a scholar and pastor in Kansas City, who reminds us of the wonderful connections between this passage and that great 19th-century hymn “Abide with Me.” A Scottish Anglican named Henry Francis Lyte composed the hymn in 1847 while suffering from Tuberculosis. At the time, TB killed about 1 in 7 persons. Lyte drew strength from Christ's promise to abide, writing:

*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.*

Four years ago, when my mother died, my brother wrote an arrangement of that hymn for her memorial service. Before the hymn, he stood and tried to share why this hymn had become important to him during our mother's illness. What we did not know then, but was becoming ever more clear, is that in that moment Cliff was experiencing the rather precipitous decline of his own health. His own struggles with dementia and Parkinson's, while not diagnosed, were becoming

³ <https://careynieuwhof.com/5-post-pandemic-church-growth-accelerators/>

evident. His speech was hard to understand, but in that moment he stood and shared that it had been the final verse of the hymn which had been so vital to him.

*Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies:
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;
In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

May the Christ who abides in us draw us ever close to each other and to Him. Amen.