

“Abiding in Love”

John 15:1-8

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Between 1973 and 1978 I lived in Atlanta, Georgia. If you drive through Georgia you can't help but notice, growing alongside the freeways, a vine that is so vigorous it climbs up and over almost anything. It's called kudzu. I understand it was brought into Georgia to help with soil erosion. Apparently, it didn't do so well as a conservation plant but it spectacularly succeeded in invading open land. Kudzu is quite good at connecting itself to whatever is in its way.

In these verses we hear Jesus described as a vine. Vine becomes a metaphor for what connects community, in this case the Christian community. But before I talk more about Jesus as vine and church as branch, I want to explore a little more this power of connection that vine metaphorically represents. On days like Mother's Day we remember that we are born from another life; life begets life. The intimate relationship between mother and child or father and child is an emotional one; for many the emotional ties are good ones; for some not as good. Regardless, this vine, this tree of life, grounds us in this world. We cannot simply appear out of nowhere; we must be given life. From the very beginning, we are dependent on others to give us the gift of being alive. Today we give thanks to those who have given the gifts of mothering to us and to our world. Some of the best mothers I know are not necessarily biological mothers but are those able to help others be connected to the vine of life and love. They empower; they nurture; they speak the truth. They have the ability to either discipline or encourage us, pruning our branches so that our lives flower abundantly. And when we are with them, we are abiding in love. The vine as giver of life is a lovely metaphor.

But many sermons I've heard on this text have used the vine/branch metaphor to say that if you're not the kind of Christian the preacher thinks you should be, then you're gonna get cut off, pruned away, so that you wither and die. So what does it mean to live on in Christ and bear fruit on that vine?

I can tell you what I don't think it means. I remember as a young child no older than 7 or 8 riding in the back of my family's blue Chevy, and I was very sad. I'd been thinking about all the people in the world who had not heard about Jesus. I imagined that if I had a lot of money, I'd give it away for a big revival, so that many more people in faraway places could hear about Jesus. Even as a child, it was so hard for me to believe that *only* those who'd heard about Jesus Christ and done what my church (relatively small in number) said was right would be acceptable to God. In today's numbers that would mean that out of the world's population of about 7 billion only a little over 120,000 would not be cut off from God. What kind of God likes those numbers?

Later in high school I seriously asked the question of how I could believe in a God who damned so many people. Then I asked myself the question: Can I accept Christ as the one who reveals to me God's truths and at the same time can I allow God to love other cultures, peoples, and nationalities as God seems best? And why does the gospel of John use such exclusive language anyway?

As realtors say, “location, location, location.” In John's early Christian community they found themselves in a difficult, either/or position. For a number of years Christians, “followers of the way,” continued to be Jews; they were just a particular kind of Jew. But by the time John's gospel came together, they had been kicked out of the synagogues because it was decided that Jesus' followers could not also be faithful Jews. Either Jesus or Jewish. Nobody likes to be kicked out of a community so important to their identity.

The Christian Jews back then were presented with the same ultimatum that today we often hear Christian denominations present to each other or to other religions. Either you're with us or against us. Either you're Christian or you're lost.

John's reflections on Jesus' words are reassuring to his Christian community. Even if their own synagogue rejects them, they can survive and bear fruit on their own; because they are connected to Christ who is connected to God. He speaks to a hurting, alienated community, and that is the frame from which we should read and understand these words.

Now today we live in a pluralistic religious world, and Christianity is no longer the alienated minority religion that it was when John was written. It is a religion with great influence, numbers, and power. Over its history it has used that power both for good and ill. I don't think we'd say the Crusades and inquisitions were our finest hour. But the church has also had important positive roles in the social order of God's realm. The abolition of slavery was rooted in Christian commitment. The civil rights movement found power through the church. Some of the earliest calls for eco-justice, economic justice, and gender equality, and a whole range of civil rights were faith-based initiatives before the term "faith-based initiatives" became popular.

So how did that little girl in the back of that blue Chevy, me, reconcile the fundamental question of what a just and loving God does with non-Christians. One way is I came to believe that I can learn from Jesus God's dream for the world without diminishing others in the process. Jesus speaks to me. He is the vine from which my faith grows. As I listen and try to do what Jesus' teaches, I find my life's meaning. And what did Jesus teach? He taught to love God and love the world. To love God is to honor the divine impulses which I call **creative responsive love**; to love God's world and God's creation is to reach out for God with our own hands and work for wholeness and healing. Even the very cross on which Jesus died is a reminder to love God and love the world.

So what about this pruning metaphor? Again, let me start by telling you a story to illustrate what it doesn't mean. One Mother's Day many years ago, I gave my mother a nightgown imprinted with a rose and the words "the best mom in the world." Her response was "thank you" but she didn't feel like the best mom in the world. Why? Because one daughter had gone to the liberal wing of the Church of Christ (not the UCC), another daughter was a Presbyterian, her son didn't go to church at all, and I had truly gone over to the dark side and become a woman preacher in the United Church of Christ. Now I love my mother and she loves me, and we emphasize our common ground. But these verses in John, and others like them, have been used over and over to cut off those not understood or those with whom we don't agree. Of course, not all Christian communities do this; but it seems that those who are the squeakiest wheels really like to prune that vine! As progressive Christians we must find **our** voice to explain what belonging to church means.

I learn from this text that **I AM** to "let go" to "cut off" those parts within me that keep me from living freely, faithfully, and devotedly to God's work in the world. Jesus wants me to prune off some of my obsessions, to cut off and cut out ways or habits that diminish my life, to focus outward and upward, to grow my life's branches both towards God and towards others. If we do this, we will be plenty busy; we won't have time to be judging others, to be cutting off this or that branch because they don't worship the way we do, or say just the right religious formula. We will be so busy giving hugs and hope that we won't have the time or inclination to judge others by their ethnicity, their socio-economic position, their sexuality, or anything else.

Don't get me wrong, I believe that there is evil that doesn't thrive off the vine of Christ. It doesn't want to connect and eventually it will wither and die, but within God's good earth, even evil can decompose and from its compost new vines, new branches can grow.

Today is Mother's Day. In spite of my mother's rather rigid religious inclinations, she worked tirelessly under difficult circumstances to give her family the necessities of life. She sacrificed and endured. She shared her joy of beautiful quilts and God's flowering creation. She loved her children and gave us many gifts.

So because of all her nurturing ways. I hope and pray that the apple doesn't fall too far from the tree--either the tree of my mother's life or the vine of Christ in which we all live abiding in love.