

Abiding

Opening: One of my friends, Jane, has an email address and social media identifiers that's a combination of her name and her husband's name together. Jane's husband died a couple of years ago after a long and difficult battle with cancer, but Jane kept her contact information the same. She said that it feels like her husband is still with her every time she looks around at the life they created together. And, even though the latter part of their relationship was hard, thoughts of their life together still bring her joy.

When I asked their secret to a good relationship, Jane told me that a large part of their success came from choosing to spend time together and getting to know each other very well. It also helped that ministry together was a priority for them. Good things happen when you abide with someone in love. And when the bond of love is strong, it continues beyond separation and even death. Strong loving bonds endure, and they grow even stronger when life gets tough.

Bonds like this are what Jesus longs for in the community we call Church. He wants each individual who professes love for Him to be interconnected with the other individuals in a way that makes it impossible to tell one individual, one branch, from another. Bonds like this are formed while abiding in the vine that is Jesus Christ.

This week's gospel passage contains one of several "I am" sayings found in the gospel of John. These sayings describe Jesus using simple images that the people of His day would understand. Jesus tells his followers He is, "Good Shepherd; Bread of Life; Light of the World; The Way, the Truth and the Life and the Resurrection and the Life."

All these sayings are reminders that Christianity is a relationship with a living Lord and with one another. You eat bread to sustain yourself. You let the good shepherd guide you. You turn on the Christ light to brighten the world.

And what do you do if you're a branch on a vine? You abide in the midst of the vine allowing the vineyard keeper to prune you and produce good fruit from you. This is Jesus' way of telling the disciples that he is going away but he will still be with them in Spirit. He will be

closer than peas in a pod when His disciples abide. As a vine Jesus is to be their source of life – they have to abide in Him in order to truly live.

The verb abide is used 11 times in this short section of John. Abiding is crucial to success in God's kingdom and the one who created us knows that our nature is not naturally inclined to abide. Often in church life, it seems easier to *do* rather than *be* – and we Christ followers mistakenly believe that it is our doing that is necessary to produce good fruit. These verses tell us otherwise.

Hearing Jesus mention vines would remind the disciples of numerous passages from the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament) in which Israel is symbolized as a vine. The vine was tied to Israel like the eagle is tied to the United States, and it's believed that an ornate gold vine graced a wall of the Temple of Jesus' day.

There are a number of lessons that can be taken from Jesus' repetitive message on the importance of abiding in Him. One message that I think was relevant for the first hearers of these words as well as for the church today is that power doesn't come from heritage or identification with a particular group. Many of the first disciples believed being Jewish gave them a unique connection to God – and many Christians today believe their particular type of worship or denomination gives them a special place with God. But Jesus says this isn't true. Connection with God comes from abiding in Jesus Christ, the true vine.

As I thought about abiding this week I recalled my ministry commissioning ceremony. There were lots of people there and not enough room for everyone to stand close to me as I knelt in front of a cross (this was years before the pandemic when you could stand close to people), so when it came time to pray over me, a few stood over me with their hands on my shoulders while others stood with their hands on the shoulders of the person next to them. We made a human chain of connectedness, and from above I imagine we looked a little like a trailing vine. I felt the power in that moment and it reminded me that ministry is never done in my strength alone. Ministry in all its forms is done in the strength of the Holy Spirit as one body of believers in Jesus Christ.

In order to be fruitful all a branch needs to do is allow itself to be tended, otherwise known as pruning. The first pruning is one the disciples have already experienced, when they were cleansed – it is the same Greek word used for pruned – by the words of Christ. The disciples believed the words of Jesus and entered into a new life of abiding with the Lord.

Now Jesus tells them that more pruning will continue as long as they remain in Him and He in them. Those who don't remain in Christ will be pruned back to the vine – removed from the source of God's power. Those who remain in the vine will also be pruned of the less productive branches in order that the best quantity and quality of fruit will be grown.

Pastor Rob Fuquay in his book, "The God We Can Know," writes about showing his tomato plants to an experienced gardener who told him to be sure and pinch the suckers. Puzzled, the pastor asked what the experienced gardener meant. The gardener pointed out growth stalks shooting between the branches and vine and said they were not to be confused with the fruit producing limbs. This man told Pastor Rob the same thing the leader of my 4-H group told me long ago: "If you don't pinch the suckers, they will sap energy from the vine and that will lessen the quality of the plant's fruit." It's a good idea to periodically spend time identifying the suckers in our life and ministry. Find the relationships and activities that sap energy from the priorities God has for us and cut them out, even when it hurts.

Some experts estimate that 20% of American churches closed their doors during 2020, many of them because they couldn't adjust to virtual church that the pandemic made necessary. Going forward experts predict:

- More pastors than ever will be moving from full time to bivocational roles.
- More churches will develop a foster relationship or merge with another church.
- Some churches that cannot sustain their congregational health will be adopted by a stronger church.

- Churches will start more churches, particularly “micro churches” of 25-30 people.
- More churches will emphasize conversion growth – meaning that churches will focus more attention on converting individuals to Christianity rather than membership transfers that have been the trend for decades.

The community of Christ is shaped by hardships as well as joy. For the one who claims to love Christ, living in God’s promises comes with times when we experience the cutting away of something we believed we couldn’t live without.

The Church is in a new and different season after the last year. Some of my clergy friends are concerned and they are asking whether or not members of their congregation will return now that doors to churches are being reopened. While I believe the answer to that question lies largely in how the church loved and cared for its members this past year, I’m not worried about the answer. I’m not worried because I know that the Church is not my church or their church or the church of any human being. The Church belongs to Jesus Christ and Jesus Christ has promised to abide with those who abide in Him.

I watched many of Mitchell’s Presbyterian Church’s services online; I read the emails with prayer requests and the newsletters that continued in spite of all the challenges of this past year. Mitchells abided in the vine during an incredibly trying time. This congregation abided in Christ and Christ abided in Mitchells. This congregation knows that apart from Christ the body of believers can’t accomplish a single meaningful thing. Challenges occur. Christ abides with those who abide with Him.

Abiding through the different seasons of life – seasons of pandemic; seasons of dry times when the need is great and the volunteers are few; seasons of uncertainty and questions and seasons when all seems well – requires remembering that the ground of the church’s abiding is the love that Jesus provides with God’s careful tending. It is this love that the community of Christ draws from and is called to enact in the world. Fruit that will last is fruit that tastes like God’s goodness. I believe it’s peach flavored – but you can choose another flavor if you prefer it.

We don't abide because there is no work to do for the Kingdom of God. We abide because it is what's best for our relationship with God. That relationship is the building block for everything the Church does. This is why we pray for God's presence. This is why we invoke the power of the Holy Spirit. These verses of scripture tell us that abiding means keeping in fellowship with Christ; reading and studying the Bible; being cleansed by God's word – confessing when we fall short of the best Christ has for us and obeying Christ out of our love for Him. Out of this good fruit, healthy ministry grows. We have the privilege of abiding that result in fruit bearing and the gift of joy from our loving relationship with our Lord. The unity that love makes possible leads to joy complete, and the mark of a faithful community is how it loves.

Verse seven states one of the most incredible promises for those who abide in Christ and allow Christ's words to abide in them. This verse promises that when this abiding occurs, you may ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. So I am asking. It is my prayer for this community of believers, for Mitchell's Presbyterian Church, here and now, that you will continue to abide in Christ and know with certainty that Christ abides in you. It's my prayer that you will bear much fruit – the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. And I pray you will each and all together glorify the True Vine through your loving abiding.

To God be the glory. Amen.