

We Abide

Text:
John 15:1-17

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

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Hope United Methodist Church

Eagle & Steel Roads, Havertown, PA

Phone: 610-446-3351

Web: www.HavHopeUMC.org

Office: HopeUMCHavertown@verizon.net

Pastor: HopeUMCPastor@verizon.net

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John 15:1-17

[Jesus said:] “I am the true vine, and [God] is the vinegrower. ²[God] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit [is pruned] 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. ⁸[God] is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

⁹As [God] has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept [God’s] commandments and abide in [God’s] love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. ¹²“This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my [God]. ¹⁶You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that [God] will give you whatever you ask in my name. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.



Sometimes it feels like if a great wind were to blow through my life, I might just get blown over with my lifelines ripped from their mooring. Have you ever felt like that? At times I wonder if my life is anchored securely, or grounded firmly enough, to let me withstand the winds of change and insecurity and doubt that are a constant in my life. In most lives, I suspect. I know of no one who feels so secure that he or she can sit back without a care or second thought and let the gale force winds of this life just blow through.

And that need not be.

It is said that the giant sequoia tree which can measure hundreds of feet in height and 10 or more feet in girth and which can be thousands of years old, has a very shallow root systems. The only way they withstand the winds and stress of so many years is they intertwine their roots with others, drawing their strength from each other. They hold onto each other at the very base of their existence and by doing so they don't topple over.

How about us?

When I was headed into my teen years, my father assumed that I would lose interest in church – at least for a period of time – like my brother and sister had. The church where I grew up here in Philadelphia – the church where my mother had been raised, in fact – was beginning to struggle for its survival and dad was deeply committed to keeping it going but I know it was wearing on him. He once said to me, “You know, when you stop wanting to go to church mom and I will probably transfer to a church closer to home, one that is a little stronger.”

But I never lost interest in church – I was a weird kid, like that. I got deeper and deeper involved. At age 19, I became church Treasurer; at age 20 I was elected to the Trustees; at 23 I became Trustees chairperson. At 26, after college and law school and marriage and becoming a dad, I finally answered the call that God had placed in my life and I entered seminary. And here I am.

The church has been my roots. The people in this strange, complicated, dysfunctional, loving institution are so intertwined with my life that it is what sustains me in difficult times as well as in joyous times.

Martin Luther King, Jr. in *The Strength to Love* writes of a tension-filled week that included arrest and threats on his life. He spoke at a mass meeting and at its conclusion a woman came to him in front of the church and said, "Something is wrong with you. You didn't talk strong tonight." "Oh, nothing is wrong," replied King. "Now, you can't fool me," she insisted, "I done told you. We are with you all the way. And even if we ain't with you, God's gonna take care of you."

Dr. King wrote that through many hard times that followed those words – the very thought that “God's gonna take care of you” – kept coming back to him and giving him power to endure. The challenge is to allow ourselves, individually and as the body of followers we call The Church, to have that power that Jesus tells us is fully ours – the power to bear the fruit that Jesus talks about in John’s Gospel.

“Abide in me as I abide in you,” says Jesus, “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I 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.”

Apart from each other, we can do nothing. Despite the American myth that strong individualism is what makes us powerful, the truth is that we are nothing without those around us who are deeply connected to our lives by the roots and the branches and the vines. And for those of us who call ourselves followers of Jesus, it is even more forcefully the fact. We are nothing without the church.

In an essay, *Antennae in Manhattan*, physician, writer, thinker, Dr. Lewis Thomas (1913-1993) wrote of an experiment using termites. Researchers collected large numbers of termites and placed them together for observation, in groups and pairs. The termites in pairs became increasingly aggressive and standoffish, they stopped touching each other, and they drank incessantly. The grouped termites, however, became increasingly friendly and active, but showed no inclination to lay eggs or mate; instead, they cut down on their water intake, they watched their weight, and the mitochondria of their flight muscles escalated. “Grouped termites,” Lewis says, “keep touching each other incessantly with their antennae, and this appears to be the central governing mechanism. It is the being touched that counts, rather than the act of touching. Deprived of antennae, any termite can become a group termite if touched frequently enough by the others.”

We humans, just like termites, want to be a part of groups and we want – we need – to be touched. We humans, even those of us missing antennae, want to be touched, need to be touched, in order to remain a part of the larger social group.

What we often get hung up on in this passage, though, is that piece which seems contradictory to the community connected message Jesus lays out when he talks about abiding. How is it possible to hear that we need to recognize our interdependence and our interconnectedness yet at the same time hear a very individualized outcome? “Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you,” says Jesus.

It’s like ground zero for today’s preachers of a Prosperity Gospel. You ask – God gives.

What gets lost in translation, though, is the “abide” piece of the message. When we abide in Christ, when we abide on God, all we depend on is rooted in *each others* lives. Our roots sustain *each other* – our antennae touch – our “God’s gonna take care of you” foundation – none of it is individualized, all of it is what makes us

know that we cannot stand alone. When we truly abide in God, we abide in each other, and that changes even our desire for what we ask of God. When we abide, we no longer are selfish in our asking – when we abide we become self-less and our asking is of a very different kind. When we fully abide in God and God in us, who we are and what we wish for and ask of God changes radically. Our faith is based on the depth of God's love, the promise of God's presence, the knowledge that we are not alone.

The invitation to abide is not self-serving. It is not to be free of the world but to be free to be in the world. It is not to be rewarded, but to be able to contribute. To truly believe in Christ calls for us to bear fruit. It is then that we get past the idea of control and self-desire and we are finally able to share. It is then we begin to realize what it means to abide in God's presence and to let God's presence abide in us.

M. Scott Peck, writing in *The Different Drum*, tells a story called "The Rabbi's Gift." A monastery had fallen on hard times and there were only five monks left. In desperation, the Abbot went to a neighboring rabbi for advice. The rabbi said, "I have no advice to give you really. The only thing I can tell is that one of you could well be the Messiah." The abbot brought this thought back, but he said he really didn't know what to make of it. In the months that followed, they pondered the thought. Without realizing, they began to treat each other differently. There was a new sense of love and respect. Others were attracted to their order. The monastery took on new life. It makes a difference in our relationship with others who follow Christ when we see that he abides in them as within us.

Do we in the Church treat each other as if anyone of us might be the Messiah? Do we treat each other as if we can see Christ in each other's face? I want to say yes – but I'm not always sure that how we deal with each other is as if we truly believe Christ abides in that person. When we snipe at each other and gripe about each other, aren't we tearing apart the very foundation that is meant to sustain us? When we complain and work against each other we are

cutting away at the vine that is our connection to God to Jesus and to each other. And when the branch is cut away, that sun that at one time caused it's growth now begins to burn away at it until it shrivels and dies.

Not one of us wants to be cut off from the center of the vineyard. Yet at times we are willing to cut others off and push them away.

I wonder if we are willing to abide in anything, to immerse ourselves wholly in something, to allow anything to captivate our heart and life, to view our whole existence through that one lens like Jesus calls us to. We do it in places when we choose – our jobs, our families, our hobbies, interests, or activities. We get immersed and abide in our sports teams when we're even willing to dress the part and our television programs when we can sit and "binge-watch."

We kid ourselves if we think that those things that root us are not affecting us, shaping us, and transforming us. The proof of our shaping is evident all around us. That which we value, which we spend our time doing, the activities that we engage in, our attitudes and ways of engagement, all speak to the things that captivate our hearts. These things are the fruit of our abiding, the fruit of our rootedness.

But how about our God-rootedness? Our Jesus-abiding-ness? Our church family connectedness?

One preacher I read as I researched this text talks about it like this:

Our abiding seems fruitful; our vines seem healthy. They might even be producing grapes, but it's rotting grapes, underdeveloped grapes, seedless grapes, grapes that are unable to produce the wine of the kingdom.

- Grapes of idolatry, self-importance, and self-righteousness.
- Grapes of a myopic view of the world where God only loves those that we love, and where God hates like we hate.
- Grapes of control, over our lives and over others.
- Grapes of our participation in structures that perpetuate an individualist and egocentric community.
- Grapes that keep us from paying attention to the needs of others, that keep others at arm's length.
- Grapes that refuse to put ourselves in the place of the other and to live alongside them.

Those are not the grapes that have sustained me over all these years in the church. Those are not the grapes from the vines that root me in the family that Jesus tells us about. Those are not the fruit produced by the abiding presence that I feel when I imagine myself abiding in Jesus and in you.

We all long for a sense of belonging, a place. And to find that place to belong is particularly hard in a transient culture such as we live in. Most of us moved to where we are from somewhere else, and if we went home, we would discover that much of it has moved too. To be a part of the church becomes the place where we can be rooted, where we can feel a part.

So we abide with God. So we abide with each other. So we abide as the body of Christ in this place and always.

Amen.

