

John 15:1-8
“Pandemic Pruning”
Sunday May 2nd, 2021

Dr. Barclay wrote, “The best way in the New Testament to invite disaster is to be useless.” Those are strong words, and we so much want to justify ourselves that we become masters of rationalization. And the truth of the matter is that many feel they haven’t been able to do much for God in this Pandemic pause. And doubt creeps in.

Because we think about the parable of the Talents. The one who was lazy, useless, and afraid; he refused to use his talent to bear fruit, and so, what he had was taken away. And then there is the parable of the 10 Virgins. Again, bearing fruit or works of love is affirmed and laziness leads to disaster. Jesus is very clear throughout his parables and teaching that those who would be his disciples must bear fruit!

Some might be struck now by a sense of guilt, in that during this Pandemic Pruning, they have not been bearing much fruit for God, but actually we’ve been abiding, and being pruned, and things have been growing.

It is apparent from our reading that we will bear fruit only if we remain in relationship with Jesus, only if we abide with Jesus. And abiding, simply abiding with Jesus is all many have been doing during this pandemic. But in the reality of the Christian faith abiding with Jesus is the basis for all we do.

There is an order to, and rhythm of life to the bearing of fruit. First, we must abide with Jesus, we must remain attached to him to bear fruit. If we abide with Jesus he promises, “Those who abide with me will bear much fruit.” If we do not abide, or remain attached to “the true vine,” Jesus, “We can do nothing.” And he goes on to say, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers...”

Let’s explore this using a few biblical words.

“Shabbat” is Hebrew for Sabbath.

Sabbath = Rest and rest is so important it is one of the 10 commandments.

Rest = Abiding with Jesus

When we are rested, we can work.

When we work according to the will of God, we will bear fruit.

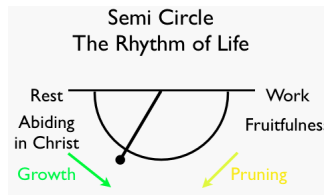
And then we are pruned.

Rest, Work, Fruitfulness, then Pruning: this is the rhythm of life and the source of our fruitfulness. Verse 7, **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”** The assumption is you ask according to the will of God.

In verse 1 where Jesus said, **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.”** Jesus is saying that he is the connection between us and God, and we with each other. In that he is “The true vine”, Jesus is claiming that he and those attached to him are the New Israel, the recipients of a New Covenant in his blood which we celebrate today in Holy Communion.

The metaphor of Jesus as the “true vine” speaks of connection and relationship, so it is a bit surprising when we go immediately from the image in verse 1 of connection to separation/pruning in verse 2, **“He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.”**

But it is this process of abiding with Jesus, and then working or bearing fruit that leads to pruning. Pruning is part of the process of becoming more connected with God through Christ, and more connected with each other. Without pruning and abiding with Jesus we cannot bear fruit. It is the circle of life as a Christian; or as I have taught before it is the rhythm of life as a Christian.



It is the half circle, the pendulum of which swings from “rest” to “work”, or “abiding” to “fruitfulness”; then being “pruned” and back to “abiding”; so that we can grow and be even more fruitful.

Now the Greek word that here is translated as “prune” in verse 2 also has the connotations of “cleansing and healing”, which sounds more positive than “prune.”

In fact, in verse 3 which reads, **“You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.”** The word “cleansed” is the same Greek word as “pruned.”

All of this passage speaks of relationship. Jesus is the “true vine” The “Father” is the vinegrower, and you and I are the branches. We’re all connected, and we exercise power only thru the strength of those connections.

As one pastor wrote, “The vine needs the branches; the branches need the vine (fruit doesn’t grow on the vine); and the vinegrower needs both. There is in the community of faith a built-in interdependence of relationship between God, Christ (who is the Church), and believers as disciples.” Desperate Preachers Site



What is fascinating about this image of Christ as the vine and we as the branches is that when you look at a grape vine, the vine and the branches merge seamlessly with each other. It is hard to distinguish where one ends and the other begins. When we abide with Jesus it becomes the same with our lives.

As we mature as Christians when people see us, they see God. As they are in relationship with us, they are in relationship with God and as we are in relationship with God we are brought into relationship with others. God brings People of Peace into our lives. Then God prunes out things that block our relationships of love. God cleanses us and heals us from those things that block relationships of love.

As 1 John 4:7 says, **“Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.”**

As we are pruned and cleansed, we become more capable of abiding with Jesus and loving each other. It is from those relationships that we gather the strength to produce fruits, which are **works of love**. The best work of love is introducing a person to Jesus Christ for if they believe, nothing can take their eternal salvation away.

The point is that as we grow as Christians, we are pruned again and again, just like grape vines; so that we can bear sweeter, better fruit, **works of love**. God prunes things out of our lives that stand in the way of loving others. God does this to help us grow. It happens in relationship with Jesus as we abide with him. The closer we grow to the True Vine the sweeter our fruit.



Now our scripture lifts up 4 ways to abide in Jesus. The importance of abiding with Jesus is emphasized by that word appearing 8 times in these verses and it is alluded to one more time. The source of our strength as individual Christians is abiding with Jesus. It is the same in terms of the church. So, its vitally important to review these 4 ways of abiding in Jesus.

First, know Jesus' words! Know the Bible to the best of your ability. Verse 7 makes this very clear, **“If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”**

We need to know the teachings of Jesus. We need to know his words in the Bible. I pray this time of the Pandemic Pruning has led you deeper into His Word. And there's still time. It's not over.

The question we need to ask ourselves is the Bible a part of our everyday life? Do we read it every day? Does it guide us in what we say, and think, and do every day? If not, we are missing part of what it means to abide with Jesus.

Second, pray! Pray daily, pray continually. The frightening, isolating events of this pandemic need to lead us to pray to **Abide with Jesus!** Meditate with him over concerns, daily duties and even things you think God doesn't care about. If you can worry you can pray. In prayer turn those things over to God. If you've with joy listened to the chattering of a small child, or the cooing of a baby, you know what God is feeling when we talk to him about things that we think don't matter.

Third, and this may seem strange, but to abide in Jesus means to **continually make a recommitment to Him** as Savior and Lord!

If you have made a commit to Jesus once, then do it again and again and again. That is part of what our offering time is about. Commit all your ways to God in Christ and you will abide in him. This we can see in verse 8, which upon first read seems out of place. Especially when you think these words were first spoken to his closest disciples and now to us as His Church.

Verse 8 reads, **"My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and BECOME my disciples."**

I hope you read and heard this close enough to ask why Jesus would say to his closest 12 disciples, **"and BECOME my disciples?"**

Well, the Greek word and the connotation here is that **"they keep on becoming Jesus disciples."** This means you don't make a commitment to Jesus just once and then slack off. Being a disciple is a continual process of commitment.

To abide in Jesus, we need to again and again and again make a commitment to Him that in new ways will be deeper and draw us closer to Jesus and each other. This is why, when I bring in new members, I ask all of us to join together with those taking their vows.

Often, we as Christians grow weak and weary in our walk and need to recommit to the One, we follow. This Pandemic has tried our faith and souls.

Fourth, we need to abide with one another in fellowship. And this is what I have missed most in this Pandemic Pruning. We need to gather together and be the Body of Christ, the Church, which is Jesus' body in this world! Now that more have been vaccinated, in-person gathering is becoming more of a possibility for everyone. I encourage you to take advantage of this.

Much has been pruned from our lives during this Pandemic, both individually and as a church.

In-person worship went from hundreds to just 7 for awhile joined in by those on Livestream, which kept us connected.

In-person Sunday school ceased but they stayed connected through Zoom. And praise be to God, children's Sunday school begins meeting in-person today.

In-person meetings ceased, and I believe we found we didn't need as many meetings.

The choirs ceased and though some are sitting in the chancel today it will be this Fall before they sing anthems again.

Much has been lost, pruned, cleansed during this time apart, during this Pandemic Pruning. But what this allows us to do now is to grow back stronger, to bear sweeter, life giving fruit.

The image that keeps coming to mind is that of the church being a tree stump. The old trunk, branches and leaves have been pruned away. Now is the time for it to start growing, pushing its' head and leaves above the ground.

As Dee Berman pointed out at our recent Church Council meeting the first one face to face in over 14 months. The Church has been there all along, though, you couldn't see it. Our parking lot has been mostly empty for the last 14 months but our works of love, our fruit has been born into the world.

Last year Vista Church gave over \$11,000 to feed hungry people. This year \$1,500 so far. In one year, we have paid off \$131,000 of our mortgage. Our Easter offering was a record amount to be used to help people as they claw their way out of this Pandemic. This despite losing about 50 members to death, and moving, and other circumstances.

And does your giving make a difference? At our sister church in Mexico a father of 6 children wound up in the hospital with Covid. The state paid for the hospital, but not his medication. The meds were on him, so when he ran out of money, they paused his treatment which threatened his life. Your money paid for his medication and saved him and his family!

We grew in Zoom Sunday school participation as well as Livestream worship. We buried most of our dead. We still have a few memorials to do. And we married our young. It has been quite a year of pruning and hidden growth and now is coming the time for it to start springing forth.

When things are cut back, pruned; we are giving the opportunity to meditate on them and then bring back what needs to come alive again. If a program or activity has been gone for 14 months and not missed, or you have felt glad to lay that burden down the question must be asked, "Should we bring it back?"

We need to bring things back and create new things that help us grow and bear fruit for the Kingdom. We need things that draw us closer to God and each other, so we can abide with God and each other.

So, I encourage you, as you can, to return to in-person worship. It is when we are together that we abide with one another and with Jesus. I encourage you to return to Sunday school and other studies and groups from UMW to UMM. As you are able and feel it is safe. And those with the gift of teaching to teach new classes and groups. We need new teachers to teach new classes.

Now comes the time in the next few months to make visible once again our ministries and missions. And for a while it will be difficult with the masks and protocol and reservations, but the time is coming when we will be free to be us again.

We have had a lot of rest during this Pandemic. We have undergone a lot of pruning, but the time is coming for us to work.

And as we do this, as Jesus said, **“Our Father is glorified....”**

In Jesus' name Amen.