

This evening's passage from John is one of those passages so familiar to anyone who goes to church that its meaning can be lost in a fog of familiarity – a sort of *oh yeah that one* zoning out from really listening or studying the words. Let us start this evening with positioning the reading. It is from Chapter 15 as you know. Chapter 15 is the second of four chapters of what are known as the farewell discourses. The farewell discourses begin following Jesus washing the disciples feet at the Last Supper which in John does not include the institution of the Eucharist. Chapter 14 is about preparation and comfort: *Let not your heart be troubled I go to prepare a way for you.* Chapter 15 focuses on the intimacy in our relationship with the Christ. Chapter 16 contains the promise of the Spirit which will come to disciples to guide them in all truth. Chapter 17 is a high priestly prayer for the welfare of the disciples *Righteous Father, the world does not know you, but I know you, and these know that you have sent me. I made your name known to them, and I will make it known, so that the love with which you have loved me may be in them and I in them.* Chapter 17 the last of the farewell discourses is immediately followed by the betrayal and arrest of Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane.

Our passage from Chapter 15 is a total of 230 words. Of those words, *abide*, appears 11 times or 5% of the total words. The word *abide* appears 118 times in the Christian scriptures. 40 of those appearances are in the Gospel of John. So, If we do not understand the meaning of *abide*, there is a very good chance that we will miss the entire point of the passage. And we may miss the real meaning of the entire Gospel of John.

As I said to you on February 4th this year, about the only time any of us have ever said the word *abide* was when we were singing the rather lugubrious hymn *Abide with me fast falls the eventide, the darkness deepens O with me abide*, colloquially translated as I am on my way out; stick with me, God. An appropriate prayer, but in a rather narrow context. *Abide* means so much more than a deathbed wish. For those of you who were in church last Sunday, you heard me speak about how much more and more complex the meaning of *pistis*, *martus*, and *zōēn* are than belief, witness, and life. The word translated as *abide* in Greek is *meno*. *Meno* means a deep, constant, and here's the key, mutual indwelling. Hence in verse 4 – *Abide in me as I abide in you* – the Christ lives in us and we live in the Christ if we believe, not in the tepid English meaning of the word, but in the active, dynamic, all-consuming sense of the Greek verb *pisteuō* that expresses the love of Jesus for all humanity.

Also as I said on Sunday the entire message of the Gospel of John is believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God and that through believing you may have real life in his name. This parable of the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches is one way John expresses that reality. A branch cannot live without the vine, and the vine cannot support the branches without the attention and the will of the vinegrower. The branches are there to produce fruit for the vinegrower. That fruit is following God's will in the world as best as each branch can understand it.

I often comment that the problem with readings set in the lectionary is that they are often out of context. So it is this evening. When we stop as the lectionary bids us to do at verse 11, it seems that the relationship among, vinegrower, vine, and branch is critical, but there is no real connection among the branches. In other words if my connection to the Christ is sound I will be fine. I don't have any real connection to fellow branches. I don't seem to need to be concerned if they are not producing fruit and are cut off and burned. Of course we know that nothing could be more untrue, but we have to continue beyond verse 11 in order to really understand. Verse 12 to 17 which is the end of the chapter read as follows:

This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I 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 Father. You did not choose me, but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The fruit that will last is that we love one another. Loving one another is an expression of Jesus abiding in us. That love is not selective. The fruit that will last is not dependent on return of love offered. If we love the Christ and have faith in his love for us, the love we give to others is not dependent on mutuality with other branches. Our ability to love is dependent on our connection to the vine. If we receive love from other branches then we are mutually strengthened to do God's work in the world. But lacking that love in no way mitigates our need to continue to give love.

I want to draw your attention to verse 6: *Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.* Far too often this passage is used to preach hell fire and damnation. The opposite to abiding in Christ and Christ abiding in me is not that I will be consigned to the pit to burn for eternity. The opposite is alienation – and is not alienation a common disease of our time – a sense of meaninglessness, a sense of being alone, a sense of ennui at best and depression at worst? In 2021 10.7% of Canadians between 18 and 24 reported suicidal ideation. Alienation is a figurative version of hell.

Our connection to the true vine is the source of our meaning; it is the gift of a life with purpose. It is connection to our God, connection to those who have gone before us, connection to those around us, and connection to those who will come after us. Connection is the opposite of alienation. It is our abiding, in all the senses of the word, in the Christ and the Christ in us. Amen