



Let us pray:

O God, you have bound us together in a common life. Help us, in the midst of our struggles for justice and truth, to confront one another without hatred or bitterness, and to work together with mutual forbearance and respect; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (BCP, 824 #28)

William Barclay wrote extensively on our Scriptures, including John 15: 9-17 which we just read.¹ He points out that we are called into relationship with Jesus and with the Father using the imagery of vine and branches. One of the challenges of a lectionary-based approach to Scripture is that we get bits and pieces and don't always have the whole context. Last week we read verses 1-8 of chapter 15. We need to remember those verses as we read today's portion to get a broader context for this morning.

In particular, in verses 1 and 2 of chapter 15, Jesus says: "I am the true vine and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit."

There is a close, supportive and, when necessary, corrective, relationship between Jesus and the Father, just as we see in today's text the same type of relationship between Jesus and us. Note that in verses 1 and 2, the Father removes every branch in Jesus that bears no fruit – did you ever consider Jesus as bearing no fruit? Did you ever consider that Jesus was pruned to bear more fruit? I didn't- those verses took me aback even though I have read them before. If Jesus had branches that bore no fruit or Jesus had branches that needed pruning to bear more fruit, then certainly I have branches that bear no fruit and certainly I am in need of pruning- at least now and then!

In this season as trees are blooming and blossoming after a hard winter, we can see those branches that have died and need to be pruned to improve the health of the whole tree. If we ignore those dead branches, we end up with an unshapely and unsightly tree. We put the whole tree at risk of ill-health and possibly disease and death.

The result, as a good gardener will tell you, of careful inspection and necessary pruning is that the whole tree does better. What was closed in becomes open and flourishes. When a tree is

¹¹¹ William Barclay's Daily Study Bible found at www.studylight.org (May 7, 2015)

Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17

healthy, we all celebrate. It brings a smile to us and joy in our hearts as creation becomes the best it can be.

Jesus reflects some of this when he urges us to keep God's commandments and abide in God's love. Jesus says this so that his joy may be in us and our joy may be complete. Abiding in God's love keeps us in relationship with God and by extension with one another. Barclay says that a "gloomy Christian" will become an oxymoron if we abide in God and thus our joy is complete. We are the best evangelist when we are filled with God's joy. After all, if we are gloomy Christians, who will want to hear and follow the good news of God in Christ? We want to follow people who are filled with the holy joy that comes from knowing a loving creator. We are willing to follow people who share the same beliefs that we do and who live a life we want to emulate.

What does it take – what does it require – for us to be other than gloomy Christians? First, we must know the ground on which we stand and from which we come. Think of Martin Luther when challenged by the Roman Catholic Church. He was ordered to recant or face excommunication and possibly death. After reflection, he said: "Here I stand; I can do no other." Martin Luther knew the basis and purpose of his life. He was committed to his faith and to proclaiming the good news of God in Christ even though that meant he was outside of the mainstream and subject to physical harm. He was willing to be grafted upon the vine of Christ and subjected himself to being pruned. He had confidence that he would be the stronger for being grafted onto the vine. Remaining in relationship with Christ and for abiding in Christ as Christ abided in him promised life.

Luther bore much fruit through his study and through his teaching and writing. His life is an example of what being grounded in the vine of Christ's love for us can mean. Our faith- our life lived as an example of our faith- can call others to belief in God. Whether someone is saved or not is God's job- not ours. Our job is to live a life that witnesses to our faith and leave the saving of souls to God. Our example can be of a life that others want to emulate. Just as our contemporary culture too often gives us examples of excess and an expectation or an entitlement attitude as people seem to believe that *if only* I have that new car, new house, a job that pays millions or whatever it may be, we as Christians – as people of faith- can also become a counter-beacon for others to follow. We have confused or forgotten the meaning of the word "love" by using it indiscriminately. We love a movie, we love a particular dress, and we love a particular food. We have, too often, debased the meaning of love by not holding its meaning up high.

The kind of abiding that Jesus talks about in today's reading means love in the sense of empathy and caring, at a fundamental level, what happens to you and to me and to our ability and willingness to be there for each other. It is more than simply writing a check to a charity because we get a tax write-off. It is writing a check because we believe in the good that will be done with the funds. It is serving others in need in ways that empower the other to live a better life than they have had to date. It is being willing to say "no" when that is the appropriate response to someone simply looking for a hand-out when that person is capable of being taught to fish and become self-sustaining.

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Acts 10:44-48; Psalm 98; 1 John 5: 1-6; John 15: 9-17

and vocation. The Crossroads Project is “designed to encourage the Hope College community to discern and learn how to live out their vocation through faithful practices in church, family, community, and workplace”². Cunningham reminds us that simply saying “all you need is love” (to quote a Beatles song) is inadequate. Yes, love is a gift from God, it is an excellence of character and it is a way of life.³This is what Jesus is doing with his disciples in today’s reading. If we abide in Jesus, our joy is complete and we will be faithful to God in all aspects of our life.

When people see our steadfastness in time of trouble and our willingness to help others by promoting practices that empower each of us to abide in Christ, then we become the ambassadors that Jesus contemplates.

Jesus has called his disciples friends, no longer slaves. We, too, are friends of Jesus when we abide in his love and he in us. What Jesus asks of his disciples, he asks of us today. Follow his commandments: love one another as I have loved you. Jesus has chosen us and has appointed us to bear fruit- fruit that lasts because it is grounded in love. Fruit that lasts because we have been grafted onto the vine that is Christ and the vine that the Father prunes as necessary so that we may each grow and be ambassadors that light up the world through our love for one another.

The author of First John reminds us that the commandments are not burdensome. Indeed, they are what enable us to conquer the world. The spirit of God is what enables us to “sing to the Lord a new song for he has done marvelous things” (Ps. 98:1). When we “shout for joy to the Lord” and we lift up our voices, rejoicing and singing, then we move away from being a gloomy Christian and we become what others want to emulate. The Holy Spirit has been poured out on us, even on us the gentiles.

Take heart. Just as a good and responsible pruning leads to stronger and better growth, so abiding in Jesus and enabling him to abide in you, means that we can learn to love one another as Christ has loved us. The type of love that promotes the well-being and dignity of every human being. The type of love that knows no end and will always support us no matter the particular circumstances of our lives. The type of love that brings joy; that is joy. Amen.

² <http://www.hope.edu/crossroads/> (May 9, 2015).

³ David Cunningham in Feasting on the Word Year B, vol. 2 (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 496.