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John 15: 1-17, Jesus the True Vine

Making Time and Space for Fruit

Let us pray:

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all of our hearts be holy and pleasing unto you God, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Good morning brothers and sisters,

This is the day that the Lord has made! Amen?

What a beautiful celebration of new life and a new member welcomed into the family of God this morning.

As I thought this week about new life through birth and new beginnings in our adult lives, my focus turned one evening to the glass of wine in my hand. I thought about our Communion liturgy – many grapes were gathered together to make this wine. And about some lovely trips I've enjoyed visiting wineries and farms in Germany, Austria and the US. I thought about my grandfather's farm back in South Carolina, and the labor of love which planting and harvesting always presents. I pictured calloused hands, tired backs, buckets of sweat... and all for what? So that we may enjoy a delicious tomato, a glass of wine or a loaf of fresh bread.

Sitting on a vineyard hill near the German border of France, I was once mesmerized by the way a strong wind whipped the vines about, shaking the grapes and threatening the crop. Some old or weak branches broke off, but most of the vine was safe and strong, bending in the wind. It was such a striking image – as long as we can bend, we will not break. I thought then about the sermon text from the Book of John, chapter 15. It is a text which has accompanied me this entire summer since I used it for the foundation of my testimony when I was asked to speak in a small church in my hometown back in May. There are so many images of hope and joy to be found, despite a few disquieting pruning and burning images.

But let's visit the vineyard hill together to hear Jesus' words for us:

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

I love the image of Jesus as a strong, flexible, life-giving vine, and God as a "Winzer", a wine-maker who ensures that the vines grow. But early on in this passage, John prepares us for the storms and struggles in life. If there are parts of our lives which are not holy and pleasing to God, God wants to remove them from us. God wants us to grow, to prosper, to bear fruit, which he will use to feed us and the world. But we cannot do that if we are not willing to be pruned. Now I don't know how that image sits with you – I quite like to picture myself as a big strong green vine with lots of ripe fruit, but I don't really want to think about

someone taking pruning shears to my life! Losing things which I had become accustomed to, letting go of parts of me which had always been there, and which I thought would always be there – that does not sound like a fun or easy process. But before we start trimming away, let's look closer to see if this fruit is really worth it, shall we?

Galations 5:22-23 lists the fruits of a Christian spirit what a list it is! When I was a kid we used to sing this song:

love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control
 love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control
 yum yum yum, yum yum yum
 yummy yummy yum yum yum!

I loved the yum yum part the best – I could just taste a big ripe strawberry or hunk of watermelon in my mouth. And in my childlike way, I knew without a shadow of doubt that these spiritual fruits would be even riper and sweeter!

But as I grew older, I wondered how to really grow these fruits in my life. I wanted to be a pleasing sacrifice to God, but HOW could I react in a kind and gentle way when I felt angry or hurt or frustrated? WHERE did I find peace in the storms of life? WHERE was love and joy and goodness when relationships and careers fell apart? COULD I increase my own self-control? My toughest struggle was – perhaps is – with patience. HOW did I gain more patience? And HOW could I grow more faith – was sheer wanting it enough? It didn't seem like it – wishing it never seemed to make it happen for me.

The answer came to me in a whisper one afternoon as I played with the toddler of an asylum seeker in the church basement. In Mark 10: 15 Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it.” If I wanted to show kingdom fruit – the fruits of a Christ-centered life – then I would have to reevaluate my priorities, redefine my center and open myself up to noticing and receiving these gifts as a little child receives presents. I needed to develop a childlike wonder, excitement and passion for the presents God was reaching out to give me. I knew what the result might look like, a truly fruitful, abundant life submitted to God's leadership - but HOW would I ever get there?!? Boggled down in the old spirit vs. flesh struggle, I turned back to John chapter 15 for answers.

Verse 3 begins to point us in the right direction:

You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

John makes it clear that wanting to know God may not alone lead you into an intimate relationship with God and to a fruitful life. We are called to abide in God. It seems that Jesus is reminding us that an abundant life requires more than just a thought or plan, and more than an emotion or desire alone – it requires a decision. A well-known American psychologist, Dr. M. Scott Peck wrote in his bestselling book The Road Less Traveled that, “Genuine love is not emotional, it's volitional.” That means, loving God or another person may begin with a feeling or a desire, but it will never become a genuine reality until we put feet to our feelings,

until we take actions based on our emotions. But what types of actions should we be taking to yield a more fruitful and abundant life in God?

It's easier than you may think. Many Christians run around working on committees, volunteering in the kitchen, Sunday school and local shelters. They sing and play and pray and do daily devotions, alone and with their families. They attend church regularly, go on Christian retreats and talk about their faith among trusted friends. It seems that many people believe that the more you DO for God and the church, the more God will love and bless you. Of course, some people volunteer their time and energy out of a sense of true passion and compassion, an outward decision based on a love-centered, God-centered life. But I know there have been times in my own life when I just wanted to meet or exceed others' expectations of me. I wanted to LOOK so much like a good Christian that I would actually begin to FEEL like a good Christian. I hoped that my DOING would make me feel worthy of God's love. It wasn't a conscious decision, but deep down I was trying to earn the gift of God's grace and mercy.

Now isn't that silly? What child ever thinks about trying to earn a Christmas or birthday present? They just wake up on their big day and run out to the tree or over to the table with a wide, expectant grin on their faces! They **know** they will be receiving presents, and they never ask why. They don't try to deserve gifts, nor do they think about "paying back" or "making up" for generosity. Children accept gifts with open arms and no objections, expectant and delighted.

But first, they often have to wait.

Yes, that's where John's text gets interesting, and very challenging for me. We are called to abide in God, but abide is not a word we don't use very often anymore. So I looked it up, and found 3 definitions:

1. To wait for
2. To endure without yielding
3. To accept without objection

Wow... no wonder we adults have trouble abiding in God! Who among you enjoys waiting? When someone in front of you on the highway or in the supermarket line is taking their lovely little time, how often do you kick back and think, "no problem. I can wait." And when you sit down to pray, how many of you are comfortable with long, empty pauses where you don't ask for anything, but just allow God the time and space to speak to you?

In Robert Schnase's new book Five Practices of Fruitful Living, he defines radical hospitality as inviting in the love and forgiveness of God to our deepest hearts. He explains that "The practice of radical hospitality begins with a receiving, perceiving, listening, opening, accepting attitude – a readiness to accept and welcome God's initiative toward us. It is sustained with active behaviors that place us in the most advantageous posture to continue to receive God, welcome Christ, and make room for grace. And so it involves interior decision and soul work, a listening and receptivity to God, as well as habits that transform us as we regularly, frequently and intentionally make room in our lives for God."

That concept really gripped my heart as I began to ponder it. How do I regularly, frequently and intentionally make room in my life for God? How often do I allow or cultivate silence in my daily life – taking a long slow walk alone, lighting a candle and just sitting near it with a

quiet consciousness, taking out a pen and journal but writing nothing until the Spirit moves me? How many days of my life - how many of your days - begin with absolutely no plan? We say that God and spiritual growth are our top priorities, but would our date-books and calendars confirm that statement?

An author from my hometown, Sue Monk Kidd, wrote a beautiful book called God's Joyful Surprise – Finding Yourself Loved. In the book, she talks about her own struggle with making room for God in a busy life filled with family, kids, church, work, social commitments and expectations. Her best advice when trying to listen to God was simply to stop talking, stop walking or running, stop reading and writing and thinking and planning. Simply stop. And then try to listen with wonder and expectancy like a child. She suggested that when we are very still and quiet, we can sometimes feel our own heartbeat. And when her young son David heard his heartbeat in a stethoscope for the first time, he asked her, "Is that Jesus knocking?" Perhaps our very own heartbeats are reminding us of the sound of God knocking at our doors, wanting to enter our lives – every second of every day. We simply have to wait for God's timing and get quiet enough to hear God's call in our lives.

But back to our definition of abiding for a moment – the second and third concepts were to endure without yielding and accept without objection. To me, this means that we will have to endure the wait, no matter how long it may be, without trying to charge in with our own plans. We will have to continually return our focus to God and yield our hearts, minds and bodies to God's will. And when we do hear a knock, we are expected to accept the call without objection. It is the true meaning of abiding in God – trusting in the infinite wisdom, goodness and timing of the Creator of our universe. It sounds easy... but we all know that it's much more difficult than it sounds!

So why go to all this trouble?

John reminds us in chapter 15, verse 8:

My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

We are not called to abide in Christ and God just to test our own strength and will; Jesus assures us that when we follow him and abide in His love – when we stay connected to the vine and bear fruit in our lives – then we will be filled with joy and this joy will complete us. A good friend once said that we are all walking around with God-shaped holes in our lives, and here Jesus is offering us the missing puzzle piece to complete us. God's love and joy WILL fill our emptiness, our longing for something deeper and more meaningful, as nothing else in this world ever could.

When discussing the rapid speed and intensity of our modern, high-tech, highly mobile, automatic, instant gratification lifestyles, Robert Schnase writes that, "intuitively, we know that this type of living does not lead to the rich-textured life that ultimately satisfies. We perceive the difference between living thinly, and living deeply, fruitfully and abundantly... Distracted by television, the Internet and iPods, focused on recurring emergencies of making a living, maintaining our health (and beauty), paying the bills, fulfilling our family obligations – there's hardly time or space to contemplate where all this is taking us...Life

lived entirely on the superficial level lacks depth, purpose and connection... Spirituality and speed go no go together well (and) God is in the depth.” Schnase believes, and I must agree, that God is present in the silence in our lives which we neglect and fear, in our stillness when we stop running, in the questions which arise when we break free of distractions, in the mysteries of life beyond reason and explanation, and God is always present in our love of others.

John agrees:

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.

Sue Monk Kidd describes it like this: “in solitude, we not only confront ourselves and the voice of God, but we confront people. Not in a physical sense, of course, but in our hearts. What often grows out of our aloneness in solitude is a sense of our connectedness to other people. We are not drawn away from people but closer to them.” It is out of this quiet, inwardly, upwardly focused center that our acceptance of God’s love for us, and our feelings of love towards others begin to grow and flourish. It is from a fruitful, God-centered heart that we begin to embody the song, “and strangers now are friends.”

And being a friend of Jesus has another benefit! John 15:15 reminds us that Jesus does 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.

Here Jesus promises not to keep us in the dark about His plans, but to let us in, bit by bit, on the wonderful story of creation and our purpose in this world. Many of us sometimes feel in a fog about why we are here on this planet, what we are called to do or become... and here Jesus promises us that He wants to give us clarity, a clear call, a deep and important meaning... as soon as we quiet down enough to hear him speaking! When we plug into the vine, when we accept our birthright as princes and princesses in the kingdom of God, then we will live fruitfully, fully, joyfully... despite the struggles and pain in our present reality. For even in times of trouble, we will be able to make any request in Jesus’ name to God the Father, Mother and Creator. And, longing to complete us, God will answer when we call.

So what’s the purpose of a new life and new beginnings? Each is a reminder of God’s faithfulness to us, His grace and mercy and endless and amazing love. A baby is a promise, a new vine growing in the ashes of a life burned is an opportunity – an opportunity to let the vinegrower God and the true vine Jesus water our seeds of pain and suffering and bring to life in us new, ripe fruits – which are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control....

And really, who couldn’t use an extra dose of all of those gifts?

Amen.