

John 15: 1-8  
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It has been noted for centuries, that human beings have an insatiable longing, a great desire; but for what exactly is the great mystery. Teenagers are often asked what they want to do after school, children are asked what do you want to be when they grow up; adults continually reflect on what they have done with their lives. One thing we all have in common is some desire to do something or go somewhere or be something. We all have hopes and dreams that we think will cure our desire; or stop us from pining for some unknown longing. We search for things to fill the gap but often find ourselves unfulfilled by what we receive.

From our birth we demand attention from our world, by insisting that we be noticed and our needs be met. With no other way to express themselves, babies cry or yell or gurgle their way through their first year telling their parents or caregivers what they need or want. Parents by and large guess at what the baby is searching for. Are they hungry, do they need their diaper changed, etc. Sometimes even after the parent does all they can think of to appease the child, the child is still demanding something. This guessing game goes on until the child is old enough to communicate their needs in another way. This is the way parent and child connect and most parents get pretty good at decoding the message their child is sending.

I remember some time ago watching a special on TV about babies that had been left alone, untouched by other human beings, left in cribs without any human contact. They suffer tremendous detachment disorders and even death when left to themselves. Human beings cannot survive without connecting with other human beings. Plato said "that this was the beginning of all human thought and culture, the explanation for all human achievement and much human misery too." We must connect. Even those who say they want to be left alone find that it doesn't take long for loneliness to take over.

Today's lesson in the gospel of John uses the image of the grape vine to show how God wants to connect with us. It is hard for us to fathom that God wants to connect with us. We understand why we want to connect with God, after all we are the needy ones, the ones with that unexplainable desire, that insatiable longing; but this is God we're talking about so some of us may be wondering why would God want to connect with us? What do we have to offer God? The great thing is this, God is like a parent to us, who wants to fulfill our every need and desire but we have to make the connection and tell God what we need.

John Calvin said that "God could have created us for God's usefulness but God's love is demonstrated to us in that God also created us for God's sheer delight. God connects." When you think about this statement and compare it to a summary of much of scripture you can't help but see that God has a thing for us. God is determined to connect with us through Creation, through the words of the prophets, the teachings of the law, the birth

and work of the Christ and through each other. God is not an impersonal power in some far off place. Our God is intensely personal, lovingly personal, close to us at all times.

I am the vine, you are the branches; intertwined; woven together. God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. This is yet another 3-way relationship seen in the book of John. Last week it was farmer/shepherd/sheep. Once again God as the vine grower creates the vine, Jesus who supports the branches, humankind.

But there is a fourth element in this analogy and that is the fruit. The vine grower does not create the vine to merely look good. There is an expectation that it must produce fruit and in order for the branches to bear fruit there must be a connection to the vine. Without that connection the branches cannot live and the fruit cannot be produced. Not only that if there are branches that are not bearing fruit they need to be cut off and disposed of. This refers to the things in our lives that are not productive, the branches will need pruning.

Now here is where we can get into trouble with today's reading. At first read it almost sounds as though God is saying that if we are not productive we will be removed and this doesn't sound like the God who wants to be connected and so it can only be describes as a pruning of what is not good in us. The pruning of the things that keep us from bearing fruit; our fears, our disappointments, our lack of self-esteem, our lack of connectedness. These are the branches that need to be pruned and thrown in the fire, not the people but the issues, the dead wood within us.

The second part of this passage is a continuation of this connectedness. It is the abide passages. The word abide is used eight times in our short lesson this morning. Do you think he is trying to tell us something? Do you think there just might be something in that word alone that Jesus is trying to get us to understand?

The word "abide" according to Webster's New World Dictionary means, "To stand fast; remain; go on being; to stay; reside; to await, to submit to, to put up with.

"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."

In other words, "stand fast, remain, go on being in me as I stand fast, remain, go on being in you.

I wonder why we don't use the word abide more often. It has such a beautiful meaning. Abide in me as I abide in you.

Verse 7 says this, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Now here is a second statement that can be troubling for those of us trying to care for one another. This is a loaded statement. Ask for

whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. I for one have learned over the years that this is not necessarily true; at least not in the way we might think. I remember as a 13 year old being told that my sister had cancer and would die. I prayed for 4 years for God to save my sister, after all just ask for what you want and it will be given to you. This would not be the case. She died at the age of 25 of lung cancer. It is beyond our comprehension as to why a faithful, committed person who prays for a cure from a disease still dies. We asked for what we wished and did not get the answer we wanted. We continually pray for peace in our world and yet peace continues to elude us. How can we believe and keep our faith in the midst of the reality we see around us? There is no easy answer.

In order for us to reconcile these two dilemmas, to keep our faith in a loving and present, connected God is to look at the broader truth of the gospel. Jesus came to restore humankind to God, to mend the branches which had been broken off and to gather all of them together. Passages like Luke 13:34 remind us, "how often have I desired to gather your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wing?" Jesus came to show us a loving, present God; a God who will never leave us even when we don't fully understand.

As for the second issue of asking for what we want and getting it, we cannot forget Jesus in the garden of Gethsemane praying for this cup to be removed from him and then adding, "not my will but your will be done." God does not promise that we will be free from disease, or that there will ever be world peace; God does promise to be with us always. To abide in us; To stand fast; remain; go on being; to stay; reside; to await, to submit to, to put up with.

These things may be hard for us to understand and there will definitely be times when things seem out of our control but if we trust in the vine grower and remain connected to the vine we will bear good fruit, like joy, love, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness. Let the pruning begin.

Amen