

*Abide In Me*

Confession – I am not a wine connoisseur. Sure, I enjoy the occasional glass of a dark red, but I couldn't really compare notes with you about the this note or that of a glass of wine, and I think I've been wine tasting once in my life. It's only been recently that I have starting eating grapes, and I can't say I love them. Some of you are much more versed in grapes and/or wine, and so this passage may have greater meaning for you, because while I don't know much, I do know that a lot goes into growing grapes, and the varietals that lead to the incredible array of wine that exists. This imagery Jesus is using is incredibly rich, and we will unpack it. But I also want to offer another metaphor that I think gets at the same things, in the hope that one, or both, helps us to live our lives in Christ.

In the early 2000s, Pastor Rob Bell created a series of videos that were like short sermons, reflections on a theme. One of these videos, called Rhythm, features musicians playing a song. While they play, Bell talks about God using the metaphor of a song, a song that has been playing since the beginning of time, a song that we live in or out of tune with. He talks about Jesus showing us what living in tune with the song looks like. Having grown up playing music, this image resonated with me, and having played piccolo in marching band, I can attest to the cringe-worthiness of things being out of tune, either within the piccolo section, or the trumpets I spent all of college standing in front of. Tuning matters. Over the years I have watched this video with groups of college students and one of the questions they always ask is how we know whether we are living in tune with the song, with God, or not. It's a good question for us to consider. Our instinct might be to point towards people's actions, to their good deeds, but I think that skips over what he is actually talking about, and a significant part of what today's passage is also talking about. Because in a sense, our actions are the fruits we bear, but being in tune is about abiding in Christ, tending to the plant, which in this case is us, so that we have the energy, the nutrients, the capacity, to bear good fruit.

Part of what I tell the students is that sometimes it is easier to know when I am not in tune with God. I feel more stressed and overwhelmed. I find myself being shorter, snippier with others. There's a need to just get what needs to be done done, therefore a lack of openness to new ideas or creativity. There's more frustration, less joy, less seeing the beauty in the everyday. People get on my nerves quicker. In music, it doesn't take much for some instruments to get out of tune – a change in temperature, how you're holding it and have your mouth positioned, the air support you give it. Life happens, and we get out of tune, too. Typically, a couple of adjustments gets an instrument back in tune, but why does it seem like sometimes we stay out of tune with God for quite some time.

It seems that at the root of this, when we feel out of tune, when we feel like we aren't producing good fruit, it's a sign we aren't abiding in Christ. Abiding is not a word we use very often, but it's really just a marvelous word, so short and yet so rich. The words used to define it, which include *linger*, all have this sense of almost a slowness to them, a sense of lasting. They also include *to sojourn*, *tarry*, and *to be held, kept, continually*. The image Jesus uses in this passage is of a vine and branches, a rich, organic image of an intimate connection of being grafted together. In order to abide in Christ, to live in tune with Christ, we sometimes have to slow down. One of the challenges can be that when we get out of sorts, it can feel hard to justify slowing down, to dedicating time to our relationship with God. In all kinds of situations, from busy family life to work projects to midterms or finals, it is so common to hear people say they don't have time to take even a short break. But when we do, when we stop and breathe, step outside of the situation and connect with God, things normally at least begin to correct themselves. We have to if we truly want to abide in God. The branches must literally rely upon the vine for support, or else they will die, and the vine needs the branches in order to bear fruit, in order to offer its goodness. Jesus says he will abide in us, and we will abide in him. Abiding in Christ is about living in Christ, all the time. There is a mutuality, and a sense that even when we struggle, the vine can provide us with all the strength we need.

Jesus shared these words with his disciples because he knew they were struggling, scared of what was to come, uncertain of what a future without Jesus being physically with them might look like. This passage is part of what is sometimes called the farewell discourse, and Jesus is speaking these words as they sit gathered together for the last meal they will share before the crucifixion, on what we call Maundy Thursday. He has washed their feet, and now he is talking to them about what is to come, how he must leave them, at least in the physical sense. This passage is meant as a reassurance, that no matter what happens, he will still be with them, if they abide in him as he will abide in them. As the Salt Blog puts it, "The enduring connection with his disciples, Jesus insists, will be so organic and integral that separation is virtually unthinkable: the disciples' very lives will be signs of that connection, just as the life and fruit of a branch are signs of its ongoing connection to its vine."

We may each have our own way of abiding. Some are able to fully live their lives in Christ, and that is a beautiful and compelling thing when we see it. Many of us need to create some space for ourselves though, practices where we intentionally acknowledge and strengthen the connection with Jesus and with God. At times this past year, the changing realities of life during a pandemic have made it more challenging to figure out what abiding might look like right now. Some of the practices we might have had may have no longer been accessible to us. Physical distancing sometimes left us feeling disconnected from the people who remind us of what God's love for us looks like. Being at home with family 24/7 sometimes left us wondering how to find any space for ourselves. This has been one of the major challenges of this past year - in the midst of the world feeling turned upside down, we had to rethink some of the things that keep us grounded and centered, that keep us in God. Jesus reminds us that when we need strength, we

need to turn to God, even if we have to do it in ways that may feel new and different, because this passage also reminds us that where we seek our strength from will show in the type of fruit we produce, in the ways we join in the song.

One of the things this past year has done is reveal a lot to us, about the ways things were working, or not working. It has given us a chance to start pruning, in hopes that there will be better growth, and I hope that is work we are able to continue. Viticulture, growing and tending grapes, is a true art form, and someday I should probably attend a seminar to better understand the ins and outs of it. What I do understand is that the pruning in this passage isn't meant to be a scare tactic, a threat, a "do this or your out." It is about God shaping us to be the people we are meant to be, to get rid of what will keep us from bearing fruit, and to allow us to produce good and abundant fruit. "Pruning," writes one commentary, "means cutting away for the sake of new and greater growth, more fruit, more abundance, more life... it's clear," they continue, "that [Jesus'] focus in John 15 is not on banishing the barren, but rather on helping each and every branch to bear fruit.

Abide in me as I abide in you. Some scholars believe that when Moses asks God who he should tell Pharaoh sent him, the answer God gives is the sound of breath. Breathe in, breathe out. When we breathe in and breathe out, we are breathing God's name, we are saying God's name, we are abiding in God. There are all kinds of practices that help us abide in God, abide in Christ, and they are good and helpful, but it's also as simple as thinking about our breath, which forces us to slow down, doesn't it. Jesus doesn't promise the disciples it will be easy, he promises to be with them, and that this will allow them to bear much fruit. It will allow them to be in tune with the God's song.

2020 held many challenges for us, 2021 has too, and while they may be different, so will every coming year. Scripture tells us that each day has enough challenges of its own. And if we abide in Christ, we can get through them, and bear good fruit. Breathe in, breathe out. Abide. Amen.