

Sermon for Sunday September 11, 2022
John 15:1-8

Prayer: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you O God, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

My heart has been going out to parents this week. In the midst of their phones going off with alerts and alarms, with the worries of whether to mask or not to mask, and all the normal angst of taking one's child to school, I've been thinking a lot about parents.

I remember taking Matthew to his very first day of kindergarten. Matthew is my youngest; he was starting kindergarten, which was located in the elementary school at the end of our block. You would think I'd be prepared for that momentous occasion, of leaving him at school, as I had done it once before with my eldest. In my experience it doesn't matter how often you do it, it is normal to feel a little bit anxious about those first days of school, it's a milestone moment for your child and for you. I of course wanted Matthew to feel safe and secure and so I offered to wait in the hall a bit until he settled in but he looked up at me, with those beautiful Big Blue eyes and said, "I don't need you anymore mum, I can do it myself. In that moment I was both proud and completely undone. I smiled, chocking back tears, and headed for the door.

"I don't need you; I can do it myself" might be the perfect slogan for western Christianity. We are products of a culture that celebrates the individual and distrusts the communal. We package the Christian life as a one-on-one transaction between a single believer and God – our more fundamentalist friends say it this way - I accepted Jesus as my personal Lord and Savior" its about me and Jesus.

We in the more liberal church say it differently but we are saying, “my relationship with God is between God and me”. Us western Christians put a lot of stock in our personal spiritual experience, my prayer life, my worship, my holy moments.

If we do align ourselves with a larger Christian community, we westerners often do so with a consumer mindset, trusting that we are free to join up and free to quit as we please. We are, in other words, Lone Rangers. We believe in pulling ourselves up by our own spiritual bootstraps and encouraging others to do the same. We think dependence on others as weakness. We cherish our personal space and feel claustrophobic when people press to close. We believe, of course, in loving our neighbors, but we feel most comfortable loving them from a distance or at least with one eye trained on the nearest exit.

Given this reality I cannot imagine a more “counter cultural” and challenging vision of the Christian life than the one Jesus offers in our Gospel lesson this morning; “I am the vine and you are the branches”, he tells his disciples, “those who abide in me and I in them, bear much fruit because apart from me you can do nothing.” If those words aren't blunt enough he continues; “whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers, such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned.”

Yikes – burned!

I did a google search to see what might pop up when you enter “vine and branches” I clicked my way to a picture of a beautiful potted Jasmine vine that someone had growing in their sunroom. It was beautiful but you could tell it didn't care one whit about personal space. It is a messy, curly, jumbly thing. It stretches, spreads and invades. It grows in all kinds of

tangled up directions and its densely interwoven tendrils, are just about indistinguishable from each other.

If this is Jesus' metaphor for the spiritual life, then we need to shed our Lone Ranger mentality fast. We are meant to be **tangled up together**. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine, as a whole. In this metaphor, dependence is not a matter of personal morality or preference, it's a matter of life and death. Branches that refuse to cling to the vine, die.

My problem of course is that I don't want to believe this. I don't want to believe it because it's inconvenient. It implies that my life is not my own, that my choices affect people I don't even know. It means that I am bound to the community, of God's people, whether such interconnection suits my temperament or not.

This week we experienced two events that show us clearly that our lives are not our own but rather we are intertwined beyond our choosing.

The tragic deaths that occurred on the James Smith Cree Nation and in Weldon affected each and everyone of us, indigenous and nonindigenous alike. In the beginning we did not know the names of the people who had been murdered but we understood, in our hearts and stomachs, that their deaths would not only leave incredible gaps, in their families and in their communities but the whole province would feel their loss. Every branch matters more than we can possibly imagine.

The second example of our interconnection came with the news that Queen Elizabeth the 2nd had died. Many of us have all kinds of problems with the history of the monarchy and its role in colonialism and in the slave

trade. But regardless of our opinion Queen Elizabeth's death, has had an impact, and 70 years of her reign has rippled throughout history. News of her death has created a wrinkle throughout the world. Every branch matters more than we can possibly imagine.

Our lives are not our own, our choices affect people we don't even know. We are bound to each other; and we, as followers of Jesus are bound to the community of God's people, whether such interconnection suits our temperament or not.

As a result, we must hold two seemingly contradictory truths in tension

One: the point of my Christian life isn't me - my growth, my liberation, my contributions, or my achievements. Rather, I am intimately connected to a larger whole **and apart from that whole**, my spirituality - profound and precious, though it might feel to me - is without value. Apart from the vine I'm not only barren - I am dead. In other words, I'm not the fruit in this lesson. I'm not supposed to be the **end product** of my own spiritual life.

And **two:** I matter more than I can possibly imagine. Every branch matters more than I can possibly imagine, because the fruitfulness of God's vine is no trivial thing; it constitutes the life and nourishment of the world. The best grapes are produced closest to the central vine, where the nutrients are the most concentrated. To cut myself off from the vine then is to diminish my fruitfulness. It is to deny the world the fruit of Christ transforming, and healing love. This whole Christian thing is about us, not about me or you.

Abide seems to be a keyword in this passage from John, appearing eight times. If God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches so what should we do? It seems we have only one task and that is **to abide**. To terry, to stay, to cling, to remain, to depend, to rely, to persevere, to commit. To hang in there for the long haul. To make ourselves at home.

But **abide** is a tricky word. Passive on the one hand and active on the other.

To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow and change.

To abide is to be vulnerable; if we abide we'll get pruned.

To abide is risky: if we abide, we will bear fruit that others will see and taste.

To abide is to be humble; if we abide, we will have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making.

To abide is to be communal; if we abide, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches.

We will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled.

A life that's deeply rooted and wildly fertile.

I cannot imagine but there was ever a time when Jesus followers found the metaphor of the vine easy to apply in daily life. But it's especially challenging to do so now. We live in bitterly divided times. We have good reason to be cautious and self protective, even within the church. It's hard in our self promoting culture to confess that we are lost and lifeless on our own. That our abundant life - lies in surrender and not self-sufficiency.

My Matthew's independence was short lived that day, long ago. When I picked him up from kindergarten at noon, to bring him home for lunch, he was quite glad to see me - he slipped his little hand into mine and together we walked home.

If only we would surrender our ferocious independence, with little more than a brief time apart. If only we would consent to see reality as it truly is.

"I am the vine," Jesus tells his disciples, "You are the branches." It's a done deal. Whether we like it or not our lives are bound up in God's and in each other. The only true life we will live in this world is the life we consent to live in relationship, messy and entangled though it might be. The only fruit worth sharing with the world is the fruit we will produce **together**.

Amen

John 15:1-8

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.