

Fifth Sunday of Easter  
John 15:1-8  
April 28<sup>th</sup> 2024

Grace, Peace, and Blessings to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ:

In June of 2019, Pastor Keith his wife Kirsten and their 2 youngest kids loaded up the car and headed east to Pennsylvania to attend their niece's high school graduation. They planned their route so they could stop at the farm in western Iowa to spend an evening with Doc and Cindy, Kirsten's aunt and uncle. As they continued their journey east across the great farmland of Iowa, they were shocked to observe that corn, soybeans, hogs, and cattle had given way to something new, something different. Vineyards, miles and miles of vineyards in the heartland of Iowa. The lush green rolling hills were neatly set with rows of post and wire trellis which provided a growing surface and guide for the vines. These vineyards had obviously been pruned over the winter- the trunks of the main vine of the plants stood neat and clean. The lateral cane branches were trimmed close to the main trunk, and after slowing down a bit and pulling over onto the shoulder of the road, they could see the shoots and growth of the renewal spurs where buds would form and yield clusters of grapes. The vineyard was set to bear much fruit. In stark contrast, pastor Keith began to remember the grape vines in his aunt Rose's backyard—they had overtaken the entire 5-wire clothesline. The vines and foliage were thick, dense, and heavy, much like a rainforest jungle. He couldn't recall ever seeing any grapes growing, no fruit was borne. Nothing was yielded from this massive, untamed, unpruned set of vines. As they continued east and the vineyards were left in the rearview mirror, he was stuck with the vision of their beauty, and the relationship of love, compassion, commitment, and care that the vines had received from the vineyard grower.

John's gospel text for this 5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter moves us into an agrarian mindset, one most of us living in the ruralness of Montana are able to feel connected with. We have or continue to till the soil, grow food, tend to the garden, whether small patio boxes or thousands of acres. John uses the agrarian metaphor of the vine and the branches to identify the relationships: God as the vine grower, Jesus as the vine, and we, you and I, as the branches. Jesus is identified as the vine twice, once in verse 1 as, "the true vine," and again in verse 5 as "the vine." Just as in the vineyard, the vine is the life source for the branches. And it is God who tends to the branches, removing the branches that bear no fruit and pruning those that do so they are able to bear more fruit. The point or message in this metaphor about the relationships between God, Jesus, and Jesus disciples is an abiding presence. This image is not intended to become a horticultural rabbit hole. The image and metaphor are meant to help bring the disciples a clear understanding of the intimacy of the relationship that exists between the Father, Jesus, and his followers. Throughout John's farewell discourse we hear, feel, and experience the pastoral words and presence of Jesus. Jesus's pastoral words in this context are being heard and received by those who have been expelled from the synagogue due to their continued belief in Jesus. They have been separated from their community and are left feeling isolated, unworthy, and forgotten. The place and manner in which they worship has been disrupted and altered. Jesus's words bring the promise of intimate relationship with God, a relationship that they felt was slipping away. They were left experiencing guilt, shame, and that sinking feeling of loss. Here, Jesus promises a relationship that extends far beyond the bounds offered by any human relationship they have known. Jesus, keenly aware that in his physical absence there will be numerous needs, requests and wants, offers an invitation to ask, an assumption of reliance and dependence.

This is not just any wish list, but those requests and needs that demonstrate mutual interdependence and ground the community in relationship.

Listen for and count how many times the word abide is repeated as I reread the Gospel text. . . . *(This part is interactive, give the congregation a moment to get a pencil and scratch paper if they need it to help keep track of the number of times they hear the word abide in the text. Reread the gospel text using the NRSV translation. Have fun with it.)* How many times? What did you get for a number? Eight—eight times in eight short verses. The relationship of abiding means that we cannot do it all by ourselves, we can't "go it alone." This is counter to the culture we are accustomed to. American culture and society are full of possibilities and opportunities to venture out on our own, to become "self-made." Dependency and inter-relatedness are not valued nearly as deeply as self-sufficient individualism is. When carried into our spiritual life, this can have devastating results. The relationships between ourselves and Jesus, God, and our communities become disconnected, unhealthy, and bear little fruit. Jesus himself tells, instructs, and warns us of such in verse 4 when he says, "the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless you abide in me." This text offers us invitations outside of the cultural norms and attitudes we experience in our day-to-day world. It is an invitation into a relationship that is reliant upon God. Stepping into and accepting such an invitation is not all that easy. In fact, I don't recall anywhere in the Biblical canon that we are told this is simple or easy. The vine grower tends to the branches in ways that alter their very growth and formation, just as God tends to us, and in so doing, our faith grows and transforms us. It does so in ways that we could never have thought of or imagined, leading us into discipleship within our communities in new and different ways.

I know most of us don't have vineyards or grow grapes, but many of us do have shrubs or rose bushes that need trimming. If you are like Pastor Keith and so many others, you have experienced that feeling of caution as you set out to prune back these bushes or shrubs. Pastor Keith boldly admits, "I never know if I should prune the rose bushes in the fall or the spring. I worry I will prune them back too much, leaving them lifeless, unable to recover from such harsh treatment, unable to produce the bright red roses they so proudly display. Kirsten has a better grasp on this than I do. She is usually nearby, encouraging me to cut them back, telling me, "they will be fine, they do better if you get the dead stuff out of the way.""

Abiding isn't a free and easy ride. It takes strength and courage. We must be ready to be open and vulnerable, courageous enough to identify and then speak truthfully and compassionately about that which needs to be pruned from our lives, communities, even our churches, and to trust in the relationship with the Father and the Son. We are to be keenly aware that Jesus has told us that when we abide in him, even those branches which bring forth fruit will be pruned so they are then able to produce and bear more fruit.

The invitation into this relationship is also an invitation into change. Yes—there is that most uncomfortable word: CHANGE. As the vine grower tends to the vines in the vineyard, the branches are pruned causing them to change. They grow in new directions, produce new shoots, and new buds result in the bearing of new fruit. God tends to us, through Jesus the vine that our branches cling to. Bearing fruit might come in different forms, and it might look different in different communities. This metaphor invites us to explore and expand the possibilities of what it means to bear fruit in our own lives and communities.

For some, it may be sharing the abundant harvest, donating clothing, giving voice to the oppressed and marginalized. For others, it may be renewing hope for a dying congregation, working toward conflict resolution, bringing comfort to the terminally ill, welcoming refugees, or starting a prison ministry. Hearing God's promise through this relationship has the power to open us up to new possibilities in our present life. The promise of abiding in Jesus is not just an end unto itself. Jesus not only imagines, He promises a dynamic and transformative life for those who accept the invitation to enter into relationships that will change and lead us as disciples in our communities. In the promise of God's abiding presence, we find not some abstract, off-the-wall speculation of a distant triune God, but rather an invitation to enter into relationship with the Easter promise of eternal life; to experience the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a life-giving and liberating presence in our context and in the midst of our day-to-day lives. We can go into our communities with the joy of knowing that we abide in Christ, just as Christ abides in each of us.

Amen