

Three Simple Words

John 15.1-8

May 10, 2009

“I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...”

- Jesus in the Fourth Gospel

“Jesus understands discipleship to him as necessarily incorporating the believer into the Christian community. The individual branch has its life-giving connection, not only in the personal relation with God through Christ, but in relation to all the other branches that comprise the vine with which Christ identifies himself.”

- Eugene Boring and Fred Craddock

The Reading

"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.

Sacred Space Can't Be Designed

Several years ago I made my way to a prayer retreat in the coastal range of California, just east of San Francisco, totally unaware of the wonderful experience that awaited me there. I fought my way through the bay area traffic at rush hour, with its constant braying of horns and bumper to bumper vehicles, and by the time I had found my exit, scaled the hillside and arrived at the retreat center, I was both fatigued and frazzled. As I walked into its chapel for the first time, however, I was struck by an almost palpable sense of holiness, by a keen

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awareness of the presence of God and the healing and wholeness that always cling tightly to God. The chapel was empty, mind you, and yet I felt a sense of holiness just from being there. I couldn't help but wonder how this was possible.

Such sacred space can't be designed, you know. The holiness is not in the architecture, the play of light through stained glass windows, the polished candle sticks, or the room's furnishings. I would love it if anyone – just any ol' stranger off the street – could walk through our doors and into this worship space and have such an experience; but I'm not overly confident of my ability to create such space. It has a sense of mystery about it, and it challenges as much as it comforts. It feels intimate and foreign, near to hand and far away at the same time. The creation of such space is beyond me; but I have a hope that Jesus' words to his disciples in John 15 will help us understand how it is possible. Let's have a word of prayer together and then we'll look a bit closer at the possibility.

God, we know in faith that you are with us in this place; we know something *about* your presence among us. We have a simple request of you this day; give us less knowing and more God. Give us a vivid, and vividly real, sense of your love and grace. Help us to turn off our wandering thoughts, tune out the concerns of the day, and rest in your presence this day, this minute ...now. Amen.

The Right Context

Last week I used an image to illustrate the impossibility of plumbing the depths of God's nature and reality; the impossibility of ever achieving an exhaustive knowledge of God. That image is contained in the contrast between a riddle and a mystery. A riddle, you will remember, is a problem for which there is an answer. We may not have discovered the answer, but there is an answer available for a riddle. A mystery, however, is a reality that can never be completely comprehended. There is no answer that solves the puzzle; there is always more mystery. It goes without saying that God is the ultimate mystery. The more we learn of God, the more we sense that God remains beyond our reach. The deeper we probe the mystery that is our God, the deeper that mystery becomes.

We dealt last week with this mystery; this week, however, I believe we are presented with a riddle, because the questions we have about healing and wholeness can be answered.

There is as well an answer to my question about creating sacred space. These questions have more to do with riddle than with mystery.

Most of us, I am sure, have a store of unanswered questions about healing. Why did this happen to me? Why was my mother stricken so young? Why did my father - my spouse, my aunt, my friend, my colleague – have to suffer so long and so needlessly? God, will you please just take this away from me? I'm sure you've heard such questions; I'm sure you've posed such questions. They share at least one thing in common; they all seem to go unanswered.

We're not alone in asking such questions. Our Bible is full of such poignant and pointed questions. Think of Job's complaints against God. Think of Ezekiel's question that cuts to the heart of human concern, "Can these bones live?" And think of Jeremiah's timeless lament, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?"

We wonder why healing doesn't come, and come quickly. Is there a balm in Gilead? I believe there is; I believe there is an answer to all our questions about healing and wholeness. To understand the answer, however, we have to place it in the context of three simple words; three simple words that indicate where, when, and how we will find healing. *Abide in me.* Everything you ever wanted to know about healing and wholeness begins with these three simple words. Abide in me, because God doesn't offer healing on our whims, like a common road-side attraction. Abide in me, because God doesn't send healing flashing from the sky like divine fireworks. Abide in me, because God doesn't perform on our command. Rather, God heals in relationships, abide in me; God heals in communities, abide in me. The beginning of healing, according to Jesus, lies in our willingness to abide in God.

This is the life-giving connection Fred Craddock speaks of in today's worship heading; abiding in God, abiding in Jesus the true vine. It's important to understand that Jesus is not comparing himself to a false vine, some cheap imitation. Rather, Jesus is the truly real vine; the ultimately real vine. We know of many vines that grow in nature; they are real, and they produce wonderful, sweet grapes; but they can nourish only our bodies. Jesus, however, is the ultimately real vine. Jesus nourishes spirit as well as body. Just as Jesus is the true bread from

heaven capable of complete nourishment; so Jesus is the true vine in which we will thrive if only we will abide in him. Abide in me, Jesus pleads; rest in me, put your trust in me and you will know healing and wholeness.

When we abide in Jesus we are one with him. The vine and the branches are not two separate things. The vine and the branches are one, because Jesus dwells in them. This image is very similar to Paul's reference to the church as the body of Christ. Just as the parts of the body have independent function and identity and yet together constitute one body, so the branches in Jesus' image are woven together in Christ as one. This is our life-connection; this is the beginning and source of healing; abiding in God, living out of a vibrant and ongoing faith relationship with God.

Jesus makes a very provocative offer in this passage. Abide in me, he says, and ask anything you want. Go ahead; ask! You'll get it if you abide in me. Does this offer whet your appetite for wealth, success, or fame? Does it make you dream of world cruises and luxurious vacations? If so, let them go; because that ain't what Jesus means. When you abide in Christ, you see, when you live and breathe and pray Christ, your perspective changes. It deepens, it matures; and you find yourself above and beyond many of life's shallow temptations. You may find that you no longer pray so quickly for your own safety and security; but rather for others who face life's ills. When you abide in Christ, you find yourself praying for unusual things: not my will but yours be done; use this meager gift to bring light and life to many; forgive him, Lord; give me the pearl of great price.

Jesus was smart. He knew what he was doing. He knew that mature faith wants one thing and one thing only; the presence of God that is the source and beginning of life and healing. If there is a situation in your life for which you will pray later in this gathering, bear in mind that your healing will begin when you heed those three simple words; abide in me. Don't pray to God for a magical, abracadabra-like solution; don't ask God for a quick fix. Rather, pray to God for a living, vital relationship that will become a life-connection for you and for others.

A life connection for you *and for others*; herein lies another dynamic of the vine and branches image. When we abide in Christ we find our personal life-connection, this is true; but there is another web of relationships that constitutes a life-connection; the community of faith

we call church, the wide and diverse range of branches woven together as one. Faith, you see, is not the private, highly personal reality you often hear about. Faith is not lived in isolation. According to Jesus, to abide in Christ is to abide in community with Christ and with the other branches. To be active in faith is to be woven into the faith community.

If this is true, we've come to the right place to seek healing and wholeness this morning. This is because healing occurs when we let ourselves be a healing community, when we live and breathe Christ, when we rise above the tendency to react to each other irascibly, or bicker and fight about this, that, and the other. Healing occurs when we look to each other for support, comfort, care, and affirmation; when we pray for each other on a daily basis, as well as for that unknown person who may be about to walk through the door. Healing occurs when we abide in Christ and find ourselves woven into a healing community.

I would love it if any ol' stranger off the street could walk through our doors and sense holiness in this place just from being here. It is possible; it can happen if we allow ourselves to be a healing community, if we strive to abide in Christ. Such holiness is accumulated through years of devoted prayer and earnest discernment of God's will; years of open, honest encounters with God, and the willingness to offer God access to the deepest recesses of our hearts. God responds to such devotion, and God abides within such space. I pray that we will give ourselves to this goal; that we will strive to be a healing community; and that we will sense the presence of God among us. How then should we proceed? By heeding those three simple words; abide in me. Amen.