

April 28, 2024

Abide With Me

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John 15:1-17

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vineyard keeper. He removes any of my branches that don’t produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can’t produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can’t produce fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you can’t do anything. If you don’t remain in me, you will be like a branch that is thrown out and dries up. Those branches are gathered up, thrown into a fire, and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified when you produce much fruit and in this way prove that you are my disciples.

“As the Father loved me, I too have loved you. Remain in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will remain in my love, just as I kept my Father’s commandments and remain in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy will be in you and your joy will be complete. This is my commandment: love each other just as I have loved you. No one has greater love than to give up one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I don’t call you servants any longer, because servants don’t know what their master is doing. Instead, I call you friends, because everything I heard from my Father I have made known to you. You didn’t choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you could go and produce fruit and so that your fruit could last. As a result, whatever you ask the Father in my name, he will give you. I give you these commandments so that you can love each other.

Abide With Me

We are close to gardening season -- probably closer than we should be, but with a warmer March the plants are further ahead than they normally would be at this time of the year. It is a magical time of the year when you can see the progression of spring through the different flowers and plants that emerge, from crocuses to daffodils and hyacinths to tulips and then irises and all sorts of other flowers and life.

You might be a master gardener or you might have black thumb, but most of us get the idea that if you want a plant to flourish and produce fruit or beautiful flowers then there are certain requirements, conditions that need to be in place and work or tending that needs to be done. I’m a reasonably good gardener, but not a great gardener.



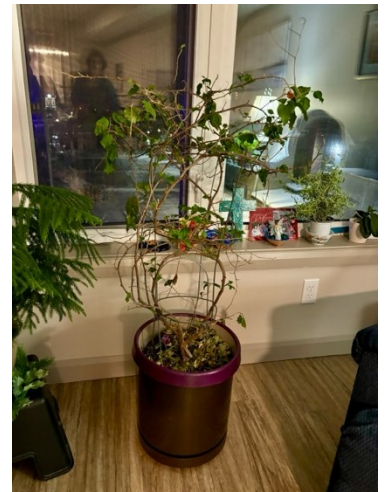
I've got a Bougainvillea that was given to me, and it's a lovely and slightly grumpy plant. It loves the summer when I put it outside and it does not like the winter when I bring it in -- can you blame it? It's meant to be in Costa Rica, Mexico or Kenya, but not Canada.

This is what it looked like at the end of last summer.

Fast forward 5 months and this is what my Bougainvillea looked like after I rescued it from my husband's office (we moved out because of a Reno and I needed to find some other locations for the plants).

I wasn't sure it was worth the effort of rescuing it because as you see in this picture it is in the middle of having a near-death experience. This is one very sad plant. Caring for house plants is not one of Alex's spiritual gifts. To be fair, the plant probably didn't like the north facing light ... and it probably could have benefited from being watered more than once in that 5-month time period.

Some of Jesus' last words to his disciples before his arrest and death include some gardening advice. Ok it wasn't gardening advice ... it was his final words about how they should live. It's a passage about being deeply connected to Jesus and to each other, and Jesus uses a metaphor of a vine and branches to help explain it.



Last week Catherine preached on Jesus using the "**I Am**" statement of "I am the gate." John 15, that Steve read this morning, contains another of the "I Am" statements. Jesus says "I Am the vine" and then he tells them -- tells us -- "you are the branches."

Jesus says that in the same way that branches are joined to the vine the disciples need to be joined, to remain, to abide with Jesus. It's not just that we have to stay connected to Jesus, Jesus then extends this to others: "**This is my commandment: love one another as I have loved you.**" (John 15:12)

Why was Jesus so concerned about this? He knew that his death would disconnect and **scatter** them. As Matthew's gospel records Jesus saying: "*This very night you will all fall away on account of me, for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'*" (Matt 26:31).

Jesus had held this very diverse group of disciples together while he was alive — people with different backgrounds and ideologies and beliefs. They were not a group of friends that Jesus joined — Jesus is the one who joined this unlikely group together. You had **Simon the Zealot** who hated the Roman occupation and believed that they should fight to be free; and then you had **Matthew** who worked with the enemy, with the occupier to collect taxes from his own people for Rome. You had impulsive Peter, and reserved and skeptical Thomas. **Philip** was likely at least in part Greek and most

of the others were Jews. They squabbled and argued. Remember when **James and John** wanted to secure a position of power and leadership by asking Jesus if they could sit at his right and left hand when he came into his kingdom? The other disciples were not happy about that one -- why? Probably because they too wanted to be important and have power.

While Jesus lived with them, he helped to resolve their differences and to remind them of the way of love, humility and servanthood. Jesus also stretched and challenged their prejudices and biases by reaching out to Samaritans, centurions and prostitutes.

He had been their glue, their CenterPoint, their guiding star. But when he is arrested and taken away from them, everything changes. The tremendous fear of the night ... the potential for all the messiness that grief brings, the denial, the 'what ifs' and 'we should've's', the anger and the blaming all have the potential to divide.

Trauma that is experienced by a group or by society initially brings people together. You can think of situations like a community needing to evacuate because of a fire or flood, or think of a school shooting or a family that has been hit by a tragedy. In the beginning people unite and rally to respond to deal with the situation, but as time goes on people fragment and divide, and the divisions can be deep. I've seen it countless times in families or even friend groups where there has been a significant loss. There is a coming together with the loss but then there is division.

Humans have always been pretty **tribal** -- sticking to our own kind. But Jesus called for his disciples to be different, to be connected, not divided.

We live in the most connected and disconnected age. It's really quite phenomenal that my brother in Korea will message to remind me of an appointment my mother has or to tell me to drive carefully because of the coming snowstorm. He's often more *au courant* about what is going on here than I am, and I live here! We can be connected to people all around the world.

At the same time, we are so disconnected. We are lonely. We feel forgotten. And we've become so polarized on issues. **We see issues instead of people.** In theological terms we call this **sin**. A colleague of mine, Aaron Miller, just wrote a book called *Witnesses of These Things* and in it he explained/defined "sin" as "**The profound breakdown of life-giving relationship for which we were made.**" I think that is a very good definition of sin. This includes the breakdown of relationship between us and God, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and the rest of God's creation and between ourselves and ourselves.

I heard Chris Hadfield interviewed this week on CBC radio. He is such a wonderful man. He is Canadian and was the commander of the International Space Station for a few years. They were interviewing him about the Voyager 1 space probe that was sent into space 46 years ago that is still sending messages to earth — which is incredible! They hoped it would last 5 years! In the interview Chris reflected about the perspective you get from space of this small, fragile and beautiful blue planet. We have so many differences, some of them silly and some of them earth-shakingly awful, but in the end

we all live together on this small, fragile beautiful planet. It's a perspective that is easily forgotten when you read the news, or someone says or does something offensive.

Jesus offered a perspective that is even higher than Hadfield's.

Love each other just as I have loved you. The same night Jesus said to his disciples: *"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another."* (John 13:34-35)

It's not by where you stand on this issue or that issue but how you love.

A number of years ago I attended a funeral for a minister colleague whose child had died. The child was a young adult who was struggling with addiction and mental health and who ended up taking their own life. The young adult's relationship with their parents had been in recent years strained in part because they had transitioned from male to female. The parents were a little more conservative Christian in their leaning and complete understanding and acceptance didn't come easily. The parents worried about their child and their mental health. In the end the young adult took their own life.

The funeral was held in the parent's church where the father was the minister. The church was full with family and members of the small-town church. It was a very difficult funeral. I was relieved to be in a pew praying rather than presiding. When people choose to end their pain by suicide it is always incredibly difficult, but this one was especially so because the young person's friends from the city where they'd been living also attended ... and they were angry. Some refused to come into the church and others came in but were not there to receive comfort but to protest, to bear witness to their friend's chosen life and to, I sensed, possibly pick a fight. The atmosphere was tense from the get-go. The father of the deceased spoke during the funeral and was careful to use "you" language instead of he or she, though occasionally he slipped and used the pronoun of the child's birth ... and when he did, a couple of the friends would angrily yell from the back of the church. Not an easy funeral for anyone. I think it was the 2nd time this happened that the father stopped and looked at them and said "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, we're all doing the best we can here. We've all lost so much."

It wasn't his words; it was more the feeling behind the words that shifted things. His words, his tone was full of defeat and love, incredible pain and surrender. There was no fight in him, and the young person's friends yelling couldn't hurt him anymore than he already was. The pain of losing a child and knowing he might be partly to blame was so great that he was undone. I can't adequately describe the experience, but combined with the pain and anger and grief, there was love. And it shifted everything. My friend had nothing left but love and hurt, and the room changed. The friends gave up the fight and seemed to settle into the pews and into the shared loss. There was no more yelling or calling out. The words from an old hymn meandered through my thoughts: "Did 'ere such love and sorrow meet?" And it goes on in a later verse "Love so amazing, so divine, demands my soul, my life, my all."

I'm not suggesting that in the end they all held hands and sang 'Kumbaya' together, but

something shifted, the whole atmosphere shifted. After the service, I and others from the church expressed our condolences to the young person's friends, and it just seemed that both "sides" no longer saw one another as enemies but as humans connected by love and by loss.

Life is hard. Life and the world and the enemy and sin bring many struggles and storms that threaten to overwhelm us and divide us and destroy us. Jesus knew this, and so he reminded his disciples to abide and remain connected to him, to the vine that is the source of life, the current of love and strength and healing.

We don't have to be a great plant. We don't have to be a great Christian. All he asks is that we remain connected. That we trust and yield to the gardener. Because as we do, we bear real fruit in the world. What kind of fruit? Peace, justice, kindness, understanding, faithfulness. That's the grace.

It's not so much by our efforts, but by our trusting that God is a good gardener. We can't save the world, but we can partner with the gardener and so experience God's incredible love for us, just as we are. A love that extends beyond us and beyond our wildest imaginations.



Speaking of good gardeners, it's amazing what they can accomplish! This is what Bougainvillea looks like now. I've never, ever seen it looking like this! It's been loaded with blooms for weeks in my mother's apartment. I won't take it back to my place when we move in — that plant deserves a good gardener after all it's been through. So do you!

Amen