

Acts 8:(26-40) 32-37;  
Psalm: 22: 24-30  
1 John 4:7-21  
JOHN 15:1-8

“Abide 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.”

In the Name of the One Holy and Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, Amen.

Happy Mother’s Day.

Today’s service combining Recovery Sunday with Mother’s Day has been a real challenge for me. It forced me to look back at my life and my alcoholic behavior around my children. The river called Denial runs deep in the lives and actions of addicted individuals. I thought I was being a good mother by attending everything that my children participated in, but how good was I when I always had a drink in my hand? I could be standing on the sidelines at a 7 a.m. soccer game with a drink in my hand and wondering why none of the other parents came close to me. I cannot tell you how many times I put my children in the car even though I had been drinking and still had my drink for the road. You see, I never drove without a drink in the car. At this time, Mothers Against Drunk Driving was actively campaigning to get drunk drivers off the road and I fully supported the need to get those drunk drivers off the road. I thought that by sending them money I was doing a good deed. What my denial prevented me from seeing was that I was one of those drunk drivers that they wanted off the road. It was those other people who had accidents, not me. So what kind of mother was I? This question still haunts me.

Last week Father Breedlove talked about the relationship among the farmer, the shepherd and the sheep. Today we have the last of the “I am” sayings in the Gospel of John and again we have a relationship story. The focus of the allegory is not ultimately on the relationship between Jesus and His Father; it is the relationship of the branches to the central vine, Jesus, and also to the vine grower, God. And, there is also a fourth element in this example, the fruit, which is the produce, the byproduct of the interrelationship of the branch, vine and vine grower. There is a purpose for the vineyard. The vine grower does not create the vine and branches merely to look pretty on his land. There is an expectation that what is created and nourished will bear fruit.

There are too many Christians standing in the shadows of the vineyard. Perhaps they have discovered that following Jesus has turned out far differently than expected. Perhaps their addiction has pulled them into the shadows of the vineyard. Perhaps they feel confused, disillusioned or maybe even betrayed by God.

Do you feel as if you are in the shadows? I believe that the major reason for this kind of spiritual crisis is that we have not heard and understood Jesus’ words in the vineyard. For decades of my life in my active addiction, I did not understand either. I

struggled against God, saying that I believed in God but did not go to church or read the Bible. I settled for a spiritual experience characterized by disappointment, doubt, and even anger. Looking back, I see that I was thinking about a God who would help me win on my own terms. Over the years, I was drawn back again and again, and finally what I heard has brought freedom and joy into my life and removed the compulsion to drink. Now I understand what God wants from me and from you and that is a fruitful harvest for Him. I can also see how He has been at work all along in my life to bring that about.

God's amazing plan for us is to keep His children flourishing – physically, emotionally, and spiritually. Through addiction, we become bankrupt in all of those areas. It is through the vine grower's pruning that we grow strong and flourish. Our bankruptcy is removed. God, and God alone, lovingly cultivates each branch so that it will bear as much fruit as possible.

We might think that something as crucial as God's plan would happen automatically in your life and mine. But nothing could be further from the truth. For the vineyard to really produce, the branches have to respond to the attentions of the vine dresser. But all branches do not respond alike. In fact, every branch in the vineyard is unique, and when harvest day arrives, each will have produced a different sized crop.

After seeing God act in our lives through chastening and pruning, we may think that we are now able to develop some perfect strategy for growth. But this is when Jesus draws us back into the vine as he says, "Abide 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."

In this short Gospel lesson, Jesus uses the word "abide" eight times, making it the central focus. To abide means to remain, to stay closely connected or to settle in for the long term. So Jesus' command to us is simply for us to be in relationship with Him.

The Epistle lesson supports the theme of the Gospel and speaks more concretely about the fruits of a mutual indwelling. "Beloved, since God loved us so much, we ought to love one another...if we love one another, God lives in us, and His love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in Him and He in us..." That God loves us is reason enough for us to love one another.

Is not a mother's relationship to a child similar to what Jesus is teaching us in the relationship of the vine? Is not the love between a mother and child the result of mutual indwelling? Our lives, for the most part, would not have been possible without the love, care, and discipline that we received from our mother. Through our mother's love, we are chastened and pruned to remove those things that lead us in the wrong direction. And even when we fall off the path, our mother's love is always there abiding in us to guide us back.

How do we know if we are on the right track? How can we know if the fruit of our labor is the kind that will last? We can know to the degree that the fruit is produced in the context of the entire vine; that is, as we love one another.

Jesus tells us this morning that, in choosing us to go and bear lasting fruit, we have been let in on the secret. No longer are we servants, but instead beloved friends. As we see in Jesus, so we can know of God. As we see in Jesus, so are we to do in our own lives and with each other as well. If we approach all of our daily tasks in the spirit of loving others as greatly as we ourselves have been loved, what a difference we will see. What a difference will be seen by all, from across the globe to across the dinner table.

But we have a choice. We can ignore the call to love and serve Christ, or we can deny it, or just plain tune it out. In whatever form, we can choose this day not to respond to God. Or, we can indeed choose this day whom we will serve. We do have a choice and it is not a no-brainer. It is not a done deal.

Faithfulness to God is not easy. Abiding in the vine is not easy. Remember, choosing for God means necessarily that we will have to choose against other things. Acknowledging God requires the reordering of everything in our life, and that is why it is a choice that we must make more than once.

The folks who take part in twelve-step programs have it right. When one chooses to make a monumental change in life, even when it is definitely a positive change, twelve-steppers teach that the change must be made one day at a time. Many folks could not bear the idea of never having a drink again, or never gambling again, or never using another drug. But for one day, it does not seem so bad. Then, as they make it day-by-day, they just let the days pile up one upon another, until it seems that they have made the decision forever. When you ask them, though, how they do it, they will simply tell you that they take it one day at a time.

Choosing whom we will serve is the same. We might not be able to bear the idea of having to totally reorder our lives and start from scratch, never again to be able to rest in familiar habits or to coddle familiar addictions. But we can do it this day. And if we have to do it every day for the rest of our lives, that is okay.

It is a choice that we, as fallible humans, will indeed have to make over and over again. But God knows that. God knows that because God knows us. Remember, God calls us friends now, and you know your closest friends like the back of your hand. Abiding in God is the most important friendship of our life. The more we abide in God, the more He is present in our life, in our activities, thoughts and desires.

As I was preparing this sermon, my son called me over to his computer. He showed me his face book page and then he showed me the face book page of my oldest granddaughter. What he wanted me to see was that they both had listed me as the person they most admired. So what kind of mother was I? I was one whose love for her family could finally be shown after I took the steps that changed my life, one day at a time. And for mothers on this special day, you will see how abiding in God is reflected in and through your family. Thank goodness that we can choose to serve God, and serve our neighbor, and all the while grow together entwined with love.

Let us pray,

Most Gracious Heavenly Father,

We thank You for our mothers to whom You have entrusted the care of every precious human life from its very beginning in the womb foster the faith of their children. Help Most Gracious Heavenly Father, We thank You for our mothers to whom You have entrusted the care of every precious human life from its very beginning in the womb.

You have given to woman the capacity of participating with You in the creation of new life. Grant that every woman may come to understand the full meaning of that blessing, which gives her an unlimited capacity for selfless love for every child she may be privileged to bear, and for all Your children.

To mothers You have given the great privilege and responsibility of being a child's first teacher and spiritual guide. Grant that all mothers may mothers to grow daily in knowledge and understanding of Your Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ, and grant them the wisdom to impart this knowledge faithfully to their children, and to all who depend upon them.

Assist all "spiritual mothers," those who, though they may have no children of their own, nevertheless selflessly care for the children of others -- of every age and state in life. Grant that they may know the joy of fulfilling this motherly calling of women, whether in teaching, nursing, religious life, or in other work which recognizes and fosters the true dignity of every human being created in Your image and likeness.

We ask your blessing on all those to whom You have entrusted motherhood. May Your Holy Spirit constantly inspire and strengthen them. May all mothers receive Your Grace abundantly in this earthly life, and may they look forward to eternal joy in Your presence in the life to come.

We ask this through our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end.

AMEN.

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