

“I Am the Vine” [6th in the “I Am” Series]

John 15:1-8

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[Have dorm-size refrigerator next to pulpit. Magnets and pictures from home refrigerator. Hannah’s drawing from my UPS desk. Milk or something for inside of fridge.]

We all know what refrigerators are for. It’s not what’s inside that’s important. It’s what’s on the outside. They are

- the easel for our children’s artwork,
- the bulletin board where your parents displayed your early paintings,
- the scrapbook for family photos,
- the clipboard for the ‘to do’ list and
- the billboard to display quotes that inspire our day.

Comedian Mitch Hedberg once said that, “If my kid couldn’t draw I’d make sure that my kitchen magnets didn’t work.”

Most parents would tell Mitch that it really doesn’t matter how good the artwork is. We put up the artwork because it’s our children that are good, not necessarily what they put on paper. We put up the artwork, photos, shopping lists and ‘to do’ lists because we want to remember our children and others we care about when they are not around. We want to remember our togetherness. The refrigerator helps us to remember that we ‘abide’ with each other. We know how to abide with family and friends, don’t we? We know how to stick with each other. Right? It’s as easy as having a refrigerator and a few magnets to remember where we belong, whose we are, and who belongs to us. Or if not the refrigerator, we put the reminders on a desk or a wall at work. This one was Hannah’s from second, maybe third, grade.

We know how to ‘abide’ with others. We keep reminders around us all the time. A picture on the fridge. A ring on the finger. A photo in the wallet. A bracelet from camp. A necklace given by someone important. [How many of you have something with you this morning? Raise your hand.]

In today’s scripture, Jesus encourages his disciples to abide with **him**. *I am the true vine. Abide in me as I abide in you.* Why? Because he won’t be around forever, and not much longer. The call to abide in Jesus is given as Jesus is about to leave the disciples – permanently. This vine metaphor is right in the middle of what’s known as Jesus’ Farewell Address to his disciples. Chapters 13 through 17 in John’s Gospel – deal with saying goodbye. Five out of 21 chapters in John’s gospel, or 24% of the gospel,

cover Jesus' actions, advice, and prayers in regards to the inevitable: that he won't be around forever. That's a lot of coverage, and so coping with Jesus' absence must have been an important spiritual issue in John's day. We might name the issue in our day as, *'What do we do when God doesn't seem to be around, when we don't see God?'*

The Farewell section of John's gospel includes this metaphor and advice to stay on the vine, and other familiar teachings:

Chapter 13 is the story of Jesus washing the disciples' feet, reminding them that they are to serve others when he is no longer with them.

In chapter 14 we hear:

Do not let your hearts be troubled. Believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house there are many dwelling places. (verse 1)

I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me. Because I live, you also will live. (verse 18-19)

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. (verse 27)

Later in chapter 15:

In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have overcome the world! (verse 33)

Chapter 17:

I am not asking that you take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one (verse 15)

All these 'farewell' sayings of Jesus are to provide comfort and guidance to those he cares about. The vine metaphor and the words surrounding it deal with the early disciples' immediate and pressing concern: How will we live when he's not around?

When someone *we* love will not be around, that question is up front in our minds. The new class of freshmen at UPS arrived this last Friday. My daughter Hannah and I will be driving Isaac to his new dorm at Lewis & Clark College in Portland this week. In the midst of carrying blankets, boxes, suitcases, TVs, and microwaves into new dorm rooms, I wonder how many 18 year olds are asking:

How will I live without mom, or dad, or my brother or sister, or friends back home?

How many moms, or dads, or younger sisters or brothers are asking, *How will I live without this one I am leaving behind today?*

The absence of those we used to ‘abide’ with prompts questions about commitment. *To what or to whom will we give our life now that he or she is gone?* Sometimes, we survive the loss of loved ones well and we continue our usual work and activities, or nurture new relationships or develop skills and talents that we did not have time for previously. Sometimes, the pain of loss is so unbearable and so unexpected, we don’t know how to live well without the presence of the person who gave us life and hope and love.

The rhythm of human life is as old as this Gospel of John: We must learn to step out and start over again, sometimes on our own, without ones who gave our life direction and meaning and purpose before. Sometimes, we step out and start over again with the curiosity and wonder of a small child, as Ryan or Quinn who we watch as they leave ‘the vine’ of Mom’s or Dad’s arms to explore new places in this sanctuary. At other times, we are also like Ryan and Quinn, and sometimes we fall and get hurt as we branch out in new places without the ones that were there before. Mom or Dad, or someone wise and strong, is not always there to break the fall, or graft us back onto the vine.

Philip Yancey writes about the times when we fall and get hurt in his book, *Reaching for the Invisible God*. He says that ‘being human is hazardous to health.’¹ ‘A woman gives birth to a child with a disease that cannot be fixed. Poverty and hunger does not go away despite our best programs and generous giving. Youth in the most affluent neighborhoods drop out, join gangs, take drugs, or curse their parents. Marriage problems don’t always get solved. Employers decide to outsource or downsize. The paycheck is gone before the end of the month. Death snares us all, eventually.’² And thus: *being human is hazardous to our health.*

Jesus’ advice ‘to abide in me’ or ‘to hang on to the vine’ is spoken in the context of hazardous living. He knows the authorities will soon put a stop to his teaching, an end to his work, and a period to his life. Jesus knew that the life of faith brings suffering. Jesus was run out of town, misunderstood by his family, criticized by religious leaders who were jealous of his popularity, and eventually beaten and sentenced to a painful death on the outskirts of town – all the while pleading to God to spare his life. From the cross, he prayed to God in his final humiliation and desperation, *why have you forsaken me?* In the face of life’s never-ending defeats, Jesus knew his disciples would need to learn to abide, to hang

on to the vine. During his lifetime, *Jesus* provided the spiritual guidance and support his disciples needed as they followed religious practices that brought criticism and persecution. After his death, they'd need that same support as they continued to reach out to sinners and Samaritans, invite both women and men into religious conversation, heal on the Sabbath, and eat with others who did not follow the traditional rituals of clean-li-ness. His disciples were part of a ridiculed, minority community in the powerful and violent Roman empire. When under fire from others, when going against the grain of culture, they would need the support of the vine. In times such as those, Jesus says to those he cares about: 'Abide in me, for *apart from me*, you can do nothing.

Abiding is not easy, though, when Jesus is gone. When *anyone* who reveals God's love and hope and faith to us is no longer with us, it is not easy to stay on the vine. When we lose those who gave our lives purpose and meaning, we may feel like we are wilting rather than bearing the fruit that comes from staying on the vine. Abiding, sticking with life, staying committed, bearing fruit is all hard when changes require us to start life all over again.

How do we abide? How do we hang on? We know how to hang on to *our family and friends*. We keep pictures on our refrigerator to remind us of whose we are, and where we belong, and for whom we work and serve. Those pictures are reminders that we belong to them and live for them, even when these family members and friends are not right with us at all times. Abiding in Jesus is no different. Sometimes, Jesus or God seems close and easy to 'feel' or 'see'. Sometimes, it's not easy to see Jesus or God in the face of struggle, loss, or competing values or commitments. Abiding in Jesus is just as urgent today as it was in John's day. One way to abide is to get yourself a refrigerator. Find pictures, quotes, and artwork about Jesus and the spiritual life to put on there, or on your desk, or in your wallet or pocket. Give yourself daily reminders that you belong to God, and to remind you that your task each day is to work and serve God.

The most common way for the disciples to abide in Jesus immediately following his death was not the refrigerator. Abiding in Jesus was done by gathering in the community of faith. The book of Acts (chapter 2) tells us they got together every day at the temple to share food, praise God, and give to others. To 'abide in Jesus' meant for them 'to live as Jesus did – to speak words of gratitude, eat with others, and give to those in need. We have regular reunions with family and friends to keep abiding in the midst of life hazards and challenges. Getting together may come every few years or it may happen every day as we finish our school or work each day. It may come face-to-face, or by phone, or by email. Regular gatherings with our circle of friends and family and neighbors keeps us fruitful – as we know whom to

serve, who expects something of us, and who needs us. When we stop getting together, start ignoring others, no longer respond to the needs of others in our community, or dwell on our own needs and desires, it's hard to bear fruit. We don't feel appreciated. We don't have the same purpose and desire to live anymore.

When we choose not to get together or not to abide with God, we also lose the power to produce spiritual fruits – those fruits of love, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. John promises that the fruits of faith will come as we hang on to the vine, stay tied to the community. Do we always 'feel' like being on the vine with others? Do we always 'feel' like spending time in bible study or prayer when other activities bring more tangible reward or better comfort or greater joy? Philip Yancey says that the way to survive the hazards of living, the hard times of life, is to keep practicing faith whether we feel like it or not. There is a type of psychological counseling or therapy that focuses on behavior more than talking about feelings. The counselor encourages clients to 'act as if' a state is true, no matter how unreasonable it seems. Their lives improve or 'get better' not by delving into the past, or by fixing some problem or trying to fix others around them. They focus only on their behavior, 'acting as if' the change they want has already happened. For example, if someone wants to preserve their marriage, but aren't sure they love their spouse, they are to start acting as if they love him or her. They are to *act* loving: give gifts, show affection, do something the other will appreciate. In doing so, the feelings of love often materialize as they act out the behavior.

Philip Yancey says it's the same way with the life of the spirit. If you want to enjoy the fruits of being part of the vine, if you want to know Jesus or God today, start acting as if you belong in a faith community. Pay attention to those who sit 10 feet from you at church. Listen to their life story and study faith questions together, write a note of appreciation, volunteer with others in a labor of love or act of service, and attend often so that others know you care. You may find that feelings of faith materialize as you act out the behavior of a believer.

Yancey says that he never 'sees' God unless he is looking. The act of looking makes possible the encounter with God.³ Disciples in John's day did not 'feel' connected to God, or abide with God, primarily through some personal, miraculous and spontaneous insight and inspiration. Instead, they knew Jesus through the regular and planned behavior of breaking of bread, by gathering with others to praise God, and by serving those in need.

My advice to those who long to abide with God now, is to start acting like you are part of the religious community, and the feelings of faith will follow. People join churches, not because they always ‘feel’ close to Jesus, but because they are committed to follow him. We join and we stay not because church always ‘feels’ good, but because we want to live like he did -- with prayer and worship and service to others at the center of life.

Much of what we do in church and in our lives goes against the grain of our culture. Some here live in ways others may not understand.

- Some here provide hospitality and welcome to those hurt by the disease and addiction of alcohol and drugs.
- Some here are recovering from addictions, learning a new way to party and celebrate life, following the unusual path of humility and living anonymously rather than seeking to be the center of attention.
- Some here collect and pass out groceries to immigrants and others in our community who have been ridiculed because they cannot meet their own needs.
- Some here raise money for scholarships in Kenya, giving education and opportunity to people who cannot possibly benefit us.
- Some here visit those who are ill and no longer able to leave their homes, getting nothing for themselves.
- Some here simply worship on Sunday, making a clear statement that the ordinary tasks of working and shopping and keeping a house must sometimes STOP so that our ordinary life is shaped by what happens here.

Not all we do here is understood or appreciated by others. It is to those who have been mis-understood or hurt by life that Jesus says: *Abide in me, as I abide in you. Remain in me, as I will remain in you. Make your home in me, as I live with you.* While human living can be hazardous – with falls, mis-steps, mis-understandings, and loss – there is no mis-understanding what Jesus wants: Jesus wants you, just as you are.....He wants you not when you’ve *taken care of the hazards* in your life, but when *you are ready to invite him into the tangled mess*, so he can help you grow through it all. Life can be a tangled mess on the vine. Try life this week with Jesus, and the next week, and the next, and the next.

¹Philip Yancey, *Reaching for the Invisible God* (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 2000), p. 93.

² Yancey, p. 93.

³ Yancy, pp. 88-89.