

First Presbyterian Church, Thunder Bay

<https://fpresbyterian.ca> Rev. Joyce Yanishewski

Fifth Sunday of Easter - May 2, 2021

Words of Welcome

Gardening is not my forte, though I do know how. Between Ken and I, we always manage to get a wonderful bounty from our small garden. I help Ken plant, he tends it, in other words he does the hard work, and then I do the majority of the harvesting.

Jesus used a number of images and metaphors to describe himself and our relationship to him, planting, growing, and harvest was among them. Today it is the metaphor of Jesus as the true vine that calls for our attention. Join me as we explore Jesus words and as we worship.

Call to Worship

We gather with joy, for Easter continues.

**Like spring crocuses breaking through the earth,
the power of resurrection breaks through in surprising ways.**

Like the vine that supports blossoms and fruit,
God's Word upholds the church in strength.

Like an attentive gardener, God tends the needs of all creation.

Let us worship God who makes all things new.

We will praise our God who brings growth to each and every life.

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Hymn

Like the murmur of the dove's song

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1. Like the murmur of the dove's song,
like the challenge of her flight,
like the vigour of the wind's rush,
like the new flame's eager might:
come, Holy Spirit, come.
2. To the members of Christ's body,
to the branches of the Vine,
to the church in faith assembled,
to her midst as gift and sign:
come, Holy Spirit, come.
3. With the healing of division
with the ceaseless voice of prayer,
with the power to love and witness,
with the peace beyond compare:
come, Holy Spirit, come.

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Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Jesus Christ, our Risen Lord, you are the vine, and we are the branches.
Your love is our strength.
Your energy is our joy.
Your attentiveness is our hope.
Your power can transform even the most difficult situations.
You nourish our faith and imaginations so that we can bear fruit in many ways.
You promise we can dwell in you because you are dwelling in us.
We gather today to offer our praise to you,
and bring glory to God the Father, through the gift of the Holy Spirit.
Fill us with the love you know as God, ever Three and ever One,
so that our love will honour you each and every day.

God, our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer,
We confess there are so many ways we fail to love you fully.
Forgive us for our lack of reverence for the earth
and for using up more than our share of its resources.
Forgive us for ignoring the cries of others
who know pain or discrimination which we dismiss as mere complaint.
Forgive us for seeking praise from others
yet failing to encourage them in their endeavours.
Forgive us, O God, and root our lives more deeply in your love.

Holy Spirit, move in us and among us as we listen to the scriptures being read and interpreted. Open our minds and hearts to receive the Living Word so that we may be transformed to live as your Easter people. Amen.

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Assurance of Pardon

St. John records that God is love, and that God's perfect love casts out fear.
Friends, we are promised that those who abide in love abide in God
and God abides in them. Claim your hope in this good news:
God's perfect love abides in you through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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Scripture Reading John 15:1-8

"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.

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The word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

Message Abide in Me

Abide with me fast fall the eventide.
The darkness deepens, Lord with me abide:
When other helpers fail and comforts flee,
help of the helpless, oh abide with me.

These words were penned by Henry Francis Lyte in 1847. The entirety of the hymn is about God's abiding presence in all life's circumstances. It was this hymn that came to mind as I pondered the words about Jesus the true vine, though the words are a little different. In the hymn the words are about *abiding with*; in the scripture the words are *abiding in*. Seeking to understand the scripture, it seems that if one *abides in* there is a sense that the relationship is very intimate and precious.

That may be why the vine and branch metaphor is such a good one when talking about our relationship with Jesus. We don't just abide with Jesus and he with us, though it is a very powerful image to think of Jesus always with us, and the image is wholly appropriate. Still, here Jesus says to *abide in* him as he *abides in* you.

The passage starts out describing the relationship between the Father and the Son; Jesus is the true vine, and the Father is the vinegrower. They work together and have a relationship with one another, but what really gets to the heart of this scripture is spoken in verse 2. "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit." Now I have always focused on the removal of the branch and the bearing no fruit part, but in my study this week a writer pointed to the words "in me". Listen again, "God removes every branch *in Jesus* that bears no fruit."

It got me thinking about what is it like for Jesus to have us in him, and what does it feel like for Jesus if we are removed. If we are "in Jesus" it seems that our removal would be a painful one. If we abide in Jesus and Jesus is in us, just as a branch is attached to a vine, then the removal would leave a mark, a wound so to speak. The vine and the branch are part of a whole, when everything is healthy and taken care of, "pruned" then the plant bears fruit.

About three years ago, Ken and I were given three little stubs, more like sticks, and told that if we planted them and tended them, in time, we would have wonderful grapes vines

with plentiful fruit. The first year not much happened, but we had hope as they continued to grow and some small branches and leaves appeared. The following year the plants took off and began to cover a portion of the chain link fence in a corner of our yard. Last year we could hardly believe our eyes. What had started as little sticks were now long intertwining vines, filled with huge green leaves and when you moved a leaf, there hiding in the shade, hanging in juicy bunches, were deep blue concord grapes.

Now Ken and I are not known for our green thumbs, and yet a little tending, some pruning, and even some frost last fall yielded a wonderful harvest of sweet grapes that we promptly turned into jelly and juice.

No metaphor is going to be fully able to describe what it means for us to abide in Jesus and Jesus in us, but the vine, the branches, and the fruit is a close one, which is why Jesus uses it. Imagine yourselves as a branch in the vine. It is from the vine that your nourishment comes. The vines intertwine, each holding the other in place and giving support. The leaves of the vine providing protection as you grow and mature. Sometimes there is need for some pruning or maneuvering in order for the vines to best serve their intended purpose. Then in time, and often, a harvest of sweet fruit.

The image of the vine and branches is a good one for us as people in relationship with God, Jesus, and in Christian community as we often think about our faith as a deeply personal relationship with Jesus and it is, but that is only part of the story of our faith. To be Christian means to be in relationship with others, first of all with those who also believe, but beyond that to reach out like a growing vine to those who do not know Christ and be in relationship with them as well.

This is rooted in Jesus himself. Jesus the Son, God the Father, and the Holy Spirit are in relationship with one another, the love of that relationship outpoured into creation. It was love and relationship which brought Jesus to be flesh among us, coming as a baby, so that God would know our lived experience through Jesus. Jesus had family; he also grew up in a faith community. God did not skip any steps. As a man Jesus surrounded himself with an inner circle of disciples and friends. They were community together, but that was not the end. Jesus taught them how to be together, how to minister to the needs of others, how to love, heal, and teach. After death when he ascended to be at the right hand of the Father, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit that we might always know God with us, but also so that we would have a teacher, guide, counselor, and comforter, and continue to be in relationship with Jesus.

Through Jesus' example we know and trust that our love, our faith, is to be lived out and continue to deepen and mature in community with others for the love of Christ, the love of God, cannot be contained. If we are living fully in Christ, then we are compelled to

love others, it will overflow from us as it did in creation. Other lives will be transformed, just as we have been transformed...we bear fruit.

It may also be that one thinks a Christian, being a faithful follower of Christ is something we choose, that we volunteer for. However, a volunteer can leave an organization at will, keep at arms length, yet if we keep in mind the image of the vine and the branch, the church is not a volunteer organization. We are part of a living faith, grateful responders to God's love. If a branch withers and dies, if a branch is removed, we have lost something, someone significant, and we grieve, Christ grieves because we are in Christ. We and Jesus notice the cut; it will heal over but it will not be as it was.

Jesus said, "I am the vine you are the branch." Being a Christian means being a branch of the vine in Christ, with all of its complexities, the intertwining support of love, nurture, growth, pruning, and watering, is the church... Christian community. Being a person of the Christian faith is not done in isolation. This is why our congregation has moved to online with the pandemic, it is a way to continue to be in community with one another. It is not ideal, but it is something. It is why we long to be together when it is safe to do so and why phone calls, video chats, and cards, sent through the mail, are so important. It has also reminded us of the importance of keeping connected to those who are not physically able to get to church so that their faith continues to grow and mature, bearing fruit.

Jesus also said, "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...Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing." Some might read this as judgement, particularly because the next part talks about branches withering, being gathered, and burned, yet it is just the reality. When we stop going to church, being in community, learning together, reading our bibles, praying, our faith does wither and die. It is a fact. How can anything grow and bear fruit if it is not nurtured, protected, and supported?

Jesus said "Abide in me" because that is what it takes to be part of the vine, to stay healthy and to bear fruit. I think back to the bunches of juicy sweet grapes in our back yard. We couldn't just see the grapes, we had to move the leaves aside in order to see the fruit. The fruit itself was protected by the vine that it was a part of. Our churches will bear fruit if we abide in the vine which is the love of Christ in community. The fruit of our labours and our love, the fruit of our community, will be a different variety than another community of faith. Each congregation, each gathering of Christians, will bear the fruit for which it has been grown, but only if we continue to abide in the vine.

There are many churches, each a part of the vineyard, each being pruned, watered, protected and supported by Christ and by God the vinegrower. Each part of the whole. There are different expressions of Christ in each church. If the church is healthy, then the vine will grow and bear fruit, but remember that means there will also be pruning. It may be that as individuals we are pruned because our faith has withered and died, it may be that we continue as part of the vine but need a little pruning to remain healthy and bear fruit.

Unlike the metaphor of the branches that have been burned because they are dry and withered, people can become part of the vine again. With God there is always possibility, hope, love, and grace. People can be made whole, transformed, and bear fruit, congregations can also experience that same wholeness, transformation, and purpose.

Another hymn comes to mind,

I am the church, you are the church, we are the church together.
All who follow Jesus all around the world, yes were the church together.

We are the church together, when we abide in the true vine, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Prayers of the People

Lord Jesus Christ, we draw near to you in prayer this day,
trusting that your love changes lives
and your resurrection brings hope into the world God loves.
You have drawn near to us and walk with us through every challenge.
We are so grateful for signs of hope even in the midst of the pandemic,
for vaccine distribution and recovery plans,
for generosity and creativity offered in so many surprising corners.
As we lay before you the concerns on our hearts today,
draw near to those we name, and bring the gift that is needed.

We lay before you, Lord, those who are in the news headlines this week
and situations in the world where justice and renewal are badly needed:

(Keep silence for 10 seconds)

We lay before you, Lord, those who are in hospital or care
and all those who struggle with illness, pain or health burdens of any sort:

(Keep silence for 10 seconds)

We lay before you, Lord, families under stress, relationships that are strained,
and friends and neighbours in need of reconciliation:

(Keep silence for 10 seconds)

We lay before you, Lord, people seeking food, homes or jobs in these hard times, and those worried about economic recovery from the pandemic:

(Keep silence for 10 seconds)

We lay before you, Lord, those who face discrimination daily, and who lack respect and opportunity because of their identity, or fear violence in their daily lives:

(Keep silence for 10 seconds)

Lord Jesus, we believe that you hear our prayers and will be faithful to our requests and concerns.

Help us seize the moments you give us to reach out to our neighbours and show them the love you have to share.

And so we pray together the words you taught us:

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Lord's Prayer

Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven. Give us today our daily bread. Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil. For the kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours now and forever. Amen.

Invitation to make an offering

While the season of Easter unfolds, the gifts of spring emerging around us also remind us of God's generosity in Christ and in creation. As you present your gifts to God to the church community that you support, may our generosity reflect God's goodness to us and our hope for abundant life in Christ Jesus.

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If you would like to learn more about First Presbyterian, get involved in our ministry and work, or make a donation toward the life and ministry of First Presbyterian Church in Thunder Bay, visit our website at <https://fpresbyterian.ca> for more information.

Hymn

Let us talents and tongues employ

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1. Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

Refrain

*Jesus lives again, earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around: loaves abound! (2x)*

2. Christ is able to make us one;
at the table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless,
love in word and in deed express. *Refrain*
3. Jesus calls us in, sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel) everywhere! *Refrain*

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Benediction *(based on John 15:1-8, 1 John 4:7-21)*

Go now, and love one another,
because love is from God.

Proclaim God's salvation to every generation.
Remain in Jesus Christ,
and like branches of a vine, draw your life from him.

And may God the vine grower tend you and make you fruitful;
May Christ Jesus abide in you and give you life;

And may the Holy Spirit cast out all fear and fill you with God's love.
We go in peace to love and serve the Lord.

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