

Scripture Reading:
John 15:1-8

Fruitful Abiding

I'm so glad this text falls on a communion Sunday and I am so glad I had the opportunity on Tuesday night to listen to Ed Searcy wrestle with the text at our presbytery meeting worship. This text is a brilliant text for us in our time as a community, we will get deeper into that in just a moment but first let's spend a moment wrestling with some of the hard parts of this text and life.

It seems and feels like there is a whole lot of pruning going on in our lives and world right now. I know I am blessed with a wonderful life but I too am feeling rather pruned at times. It seems there are constant difficulties and cut offs in relationships but in the bigger scheme of things we are struck once again in our world with natural disaster and violence in the face of injustice.

With the devastating earthquake in Nepal, with so many dead and so many more left in dire circumstances. We just passed the one year anniversary of the kidnapping of all the school girls in Nigeria by Boko Haram. Then there's the violence in Baltimore after yet another young black man is treated unjustly. My Aunt sent me an email this week asking for prayers for Kenya. A retired minister couple from their congregation in Portland, Oregon is working in hospitals and an orphanage there that are being targeted along with their local staff because they are Christian. And I have heard from several friends recently who are dealing with pretty difficult things at work or home. And....(You fill in the blanks)

And that's the thing. "At any given moment, even when things are going relatively well, there are still so many difficult things with which to contend in this life and it often feels like being pruned.

Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe it just feels like being cut, cut down by life's tragedies great or small, cut down by disappointment or despair, cut down by illness or job loss or other circumstances beyond our control and left to wither and die.

It's easy to read this passage as one of judgment and threat. But I think the thrust of the passage is promise. Why? It all has to do with context. First, the context of the narrative: Jesus is offering these words to his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion. He knows what is going to happen – both to himself and to his flock – and they do not. They are about to be cut down by his crucifixion and death and he is assuring them that it will not be mere, senseless cutting but that they will survive, even flourish. The second context is that of the community for which John writes. Because by the time they hear these words they have already been scattered, likely thrown out of their synagogue, and have had plenty of reason to feel like they've been

abandoned. But John writes to assure them that while they have indeed been cut, it is the pruning for more abundant fruit and life.”¹

“Christians still read the Bible strangely. We read the Bible as if we were the point, as though we are not, or never were, the Gentiles” (Willie Jennings).

Karoline Lewis writes “The more-often-than-not meaning of 15:6 is one of those strange readings, “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” You don’t abide in me? Well, then, you are cut off, discarded. And if that were not enough, let’s be sure to throw you into the furnace of hell for good measure.

As if Jesus’ words are a rationale for judgment. As if Jesus’ words justify that we’ve always been a part of the “in” crowd. As if Jesus had only us in mind. We are quite accomplished when it comes to judgment -- so quick to determine who’s in and who’s out. And we seem to get better at it all the time.

We are not the point. The fact is, the community for which John was written was indeed thrown away, thrown out -- like the man born blind (9:34). Verse 6 is not a verse of condemnation because that is not what Jesus came to do (3:17). Rather, it is a statement of life. Without connection to a life source, abundant life is not possible.

The image of the vine introduces the last “I AM” statement with a predicate nominative in the Gospel of John. ... Twice Jesus will identify himself as the vine, first, as the true vine (15:1) and then as “I AM the vine” (15:5). The image follows on the heels of “do as the Father commanded me” (14:31), so the disciples may very well be wondering what might that be and how do we do it? The image of the vine offers a picture by which the disciples may see themselves as able to do as commanded because of their connection to the vine. To do the commandments means to bear fruit. ... Jesus is the vine, “my Father” is the vine grower. Like any good vine grower, the Father tends the vine with care, pruning where necessary so that it bears as much fruit as possible (15:16). At the forefront of this image is the theme of dependence. The vine needs the vine grower as much as the vine grower needs the vine. The vine needs the vine grower for its optimal growth and production, even its abundance. It will produce more fruit, fruit in abundance, if cared for. The vine grower needs the vine to produce, to make abundance possible for sustenance and life. The mutuality assumed in this image is essential especially at this point in the story. Jesus knows what’s next. The Farewell Discourse is all about leaving his disciples with words of comfort and hope in the midst of troubled hearts and worried souls. Why this image here and now?...Because it is an image that intimates profound dependence. Profound reliance. Because life is nothing without belonging, without intimacy, without relationship.

How can you bear fruit? How can you imagine being beyond yourself? How can you realize your potential if you have no grounding, no sense of origin, no affirmation of possibility outside yourself?”²

¹ <http://www.davidlose.net/2015/04/easter-5-b-on-being-pruned/>

² <http://www.workingpreacher.org/craft.aspx?post=3605>

“The overwhelming thrust of the passage is fruitfulness. The words bear fruit appear six times in these eight verses. Fruit-bearing is not something that the branches do by force of will. The fruit happens organically because the vine is true and the gardener good. But the branches of this passage do choose to abide.

The verb abide like the phrase bear fruit appears over and over -- eight times in four verses here -- and will be repeated in part two of the passage next week when we learn that abiding in Jesus means abiding in Jesus' love.

The bearing of fruit depends on dependence. It depends on connection. It depends on origin. It depends on belonging. As soon as you think you can produce anything from the basis of your own sovereignty, from your own efforts, from your own sense of independence, think about it. What kind of fruit will that be?

Because bearing fruit has everything to do with who you are in relationship. I wonder if this is what we tend to forget or ignore. That the manifestations of our faith are not individual expressions of our theological commitments and convictions but are deeply lodged in and arise from the communities of our lives. That there is truncated potential for faith embodied if we do not realize that the bearing fruit of our faith is premised on dependence.”³

Ed Searcy reminded us this week that communion is rooted in community. That this table that we have just shared is about connection with God, Jesus and one another. That what we receive at this table is a reminder of that deep connection with Jesus that holds and prepares us in love, sacrifice and abundance. I realized that as we are coming together in our time of shared worship and ministry with the Anglicans that one of the concerns being voiced - there might be too much communion. If however communion is about holding together, and rooting the community perhaps that is exactly what we need in this time of in-between. This passage for us today reminds us that being rooted first in God and then in community is how we will strengthen and grow and bear fruit. A branch cannot bear trust by itself, abide in the vine with intimacy, love and fruitfulness.

So this begs the question What does it mean to bear fruit? We will all have some interpretations but ultimately it means to manifest who Jesus is in your life. Galatians 5:22 gives us some clear examples “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.” Because we have a relationship with Jesus we will bear fruit. But all of this is lifted up to the disciples in community. So the question for us becomes how will we as a community bear fruit and stay connected to the vine which will bring us abundance? Just in case we think the disciples had it easier than us let us be reminded that this passage sits within Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples. He shares and reminds them of this abiding love and connection because he knows he will not be with them much longer and he longs for them to hear the language of promise letting them know that they will not be abandoned. You are not alone, I will not leave you orphaned.

³ http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2434

That can't be easy for the disciples to believe at times they must have felt orphaned, at times we feel it too. For so much of life it seems impossible to see a fruitful future. "But amid this uncertainty and distress, Jesus still invites us – actually, not just invites but promises us – that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us like a vine clings to a tree so that we endure, persevere, and even flourish among these present difficulties.

Here's the thing: if Jesus had only said, "abide in me or else," that would be a different matter. But it's not. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "as I abide in you." This is more than good advice. More than an invitation. This is a promise, that no matter what happens, Jesus will be with us. That no matter what happens, Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens, God in Jesus will bring all things to a good end.

Lose continues that these words are said just before Jesus goes to the cross. And I would argue that the cross was not simply a part of some larger plan, but rather the chief example of God's commitment to wrestle life and hope from the very place that seems most devoid of life and hope."⁴

So when we wonder if the world has been abandoned we look at where community, commitment, love, intimacy and the fruits of the spirit are abundant and we Thank God for rescue workers, and aid givers in Nepal. I have a cousin who is a mountaineer guide and they were climbing Everest at the time. They were able to get out but the majority of their Sherpa team wanted to get home quickly because their families were in Kathmandu. My cousins team shared photos with us of rescue efforts made to get injured folks down the mountain and back to safety and with their families. And so connected to the vine we continue praying for Nepal. We hope and continue to pray for those school girls in Nigeria and we connect their story to our sabbath story because the fruit of our connection is that we care for the strangers and see them as a gift of God. We long to help and live in hope believing that somehow in the end destruction is not the last word. We know God has not abandoned us when we watch videos of 100 clergy of different denominations walking hand in hand in peaceful protest through the violence sparked in Baltimore and we praise God for their witness and are shocked as we hear the courage of prosecutors call for charges against the officers. We hope and pray that this time true justice like that connected to the true vine will prevail. We thank God for folks who are working to care for those in hospitals and orphanages in Kenya and we long to see their light and hope overcome all destructive forces.

It is as we abide in the vine, live in connection with the holy that we will bear fruit that offers abundance. It is as we abide in truth and love with one another that we will bear fruit not for ourselves (that is not the point) but for all of creation. "We bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the gardener-God who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into the unity of the Father and Son. God's love, presence, and pruning are gifts. But we do choose the abiding place of our soul. If we want to bear Jesus' fruit, then we choose to abide in him, which we will learn in John 15:9 means to abide in his love."

⁴ Lose, David

May we as Squamish United Church now and even more so throughout the years to come abide first in Christ connected to the community God has given us that we might bear fruit for the flourishing of our community of Squamish and the world beyond.

Amen.