

5th Sunday of Easter, Year B

May 2, 2021

St. Charles Ave Presbyterian Church

Rev. Sarah Chancellor-Watson

John 15:1-8

“Abiding Place”

Recently I took a trip to visit my in-laws in Texas and we spent a few days up in the hill country at the Presbyterian Conference Center Mo Ranch. Carved by the Guadalupe River, Mo Ranch is designed for rest, relaxation, and renewal. For many it is a what can be called a “thin place,” a place where the realm of heaven and the realm of earth seem separated by hardly anything at all. Given today’s text it is what I would call, an “abiding place,” a place where we go to abide with God and we are reminded that God abides in us. Being there reminded me of all the other abiding places I’ve been to and experienced in my life. Particularly I was reminded of the camp and conference center in eastern Oklahoma I went to as a child and then worked the 3 best summers of my life as a staff member in college. Nestled in the foothills of the Ozarks, Dwight Mission is one of the first places that I felt and came to know the love of God and grew into my identity and calling as a disciple. It was one of the places growing up where I could be myself, where I could be silly and loud, and explore my gifts for leadership and ministry, surrounded by a community of encouraging and loving people – I felt like I truly belonged.

Today’s scripture lesson from John is about this kind of life – one lived in abundant fruitfulness, in communion and relationship with God and in communion and relationship with others. It is part of Jesus’ farewell discourse, where he is preparing his disciples for life without his physical presence, where they must continue his mission, sharing the gospel and remembering all that he has taught them. His parting words are meant to give his disciples strength for the days after his death. Now, of the 4 gospel writers, John is the more esoteric, preferring to use metaphor, allegory, and symbol to make his point about who Christ is and who we are as Christ’s disciples. And these devices that John uses are powerful literary tools not in that they help define a thing, but in that they point to something greater. In his farewell discourse Jesus self-identifies in images that are familiar to his followers and hold deep theological meaning: bread, light, shepherd, life, way, truth, and now vine. They all point to relationships – with God, with Jesus, and with each other.

In Eugene Peterson's *The Message*, a contemporary language paraphrase of the Bible, he translates today's passage in this way – "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." This idea of making a home, finding our heart's true home in Jesus, it brings us a settled peace to the turmoil that often characterizes our lives." Jesus is our abiding place. Just as the health of the branch depends on the vine and the vine grower, so too our lives are dependent upon Jesus and God. Now this notion flies in the face of our western ideals of independence and self-reliance. The idea that "I can make it on my own" and "I can take care of myself" is called out on the floor as Jesus says, "apart from the me you can do nothing, you will wither and become like dried out dead branches." We quite simply need the connection to the vine and we need the care of the gardener, and we need each other – a truth that we have learned in than a few ways this past year and yet we still need reminding.

The Christian life, begins in love – through the care and tenderness of the gardener and the life sustaining connection to the vine. In the sacrament of baptism, we use this same language of the vine to talk about how those who are baptized are now grafted on to the body of Christ. Even before we know and understand this connection, Christ claims us as his very own and we are joined to something bigger than ourselves. The Christian life is then carried out in love – through the fruit that is brought forth within us. Now, bearing fruit does not make disciples, but instead reveals disciples. We must be wary of equating our self-worth with our successes and what we can produce. Being connected to the vine means that we don't have to force the production of fruit, it is created naturally within us as part of the vine and tended by the vine grower. And the fruit that we produce, the works of love, as disciples they become natural outpourings of ourselves, they come from the love we have already received. Additionally, being a part of the vine means that we lovingly pruned by God and we are continually shaped in our discipleship. Sometimes we have to get out of our own way so that God working in us may produce more fruit. The words of the epistle of 1st John which we opened worship with reminds us of this - "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them," "We love because he first loved us." You see, God doesn't love us because we produce fruit, we produce fruit because God loves us.

One my favorite parts about being at camp was all the songs that we learned, from the ridiculous and silly songs about bazooka bubble gum and Father Abraham, to the contemplative and prayerful songs. And it is these melodies that my mind wanders to when I'm in need of

peace and reassurance, they are the lullabies that I sing to my son at night. Our scripture today reminds me of one in particular. It begins, “we are one in the Spirit, we are one in the Lord.” God’s love for us and our faithful response to that love keeps us connected to the vine, where we are made one with Christ and with each other. The song ends with the line, “and they’ll know we are Christians by our love.” The world will know us by our fruits. We cannot untangle our love for God from our love for neighbor. Loving others, sharing the life-giving fruit that God has produced in us, that is what gives God glory.

We are chosen to bear the fruit of heaven, the fruit of love, and Jesus is the one who has made that possible for us. The eternal life promised us through Christ’s death and resurrection, it begins now – as branches on a vine, as those who have found their abiding place, and as those who bear fruit to feed this hungry world.

