

John 15:1-8
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“Abiding in the Vine”

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It seems like forever since we have had one of those big lakefront festivals that many of us enjoy in the Milwaukee area. I remember sitting on my porch last August to attend the “Virtual” IrishFest. The organizers offered music, culture, art and history related to Ireland, all done online. It was nice event, very well done, but it wasn’t the same as being there.

This year festival goers are hearing about more festivals which are cancelling or moving to the fall season in hopes more of the population gets vaccinated and it is safer to gather in large crowds.

I learned about another festival, this one in Grapevine, Texas where they have an annual GrapeFest. This festival is planned to happen in September of this year. The events will include music, wine tasting and more. There are children’s activities and the annual Grape Stomp. Grapefest is celebrating its 35th year, and during those days there will be a lot of people we might say, “sticking close to the vine.”

Sticking close to the vine is what Jesus is saying to his disciples today. Our Savior uses the word “abide” with the same depth and meaning as when he uses words like “Grace” or “peace.” Jesus tells his listeners, “abide in me as I abide in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.” Abiding in Christ is the good news of this story.

No matter what comes along, no matter how difficult life gets, no matter how unsure we become about the future, no matter the unexpected emergencies, we always abide in Christ.

That isn’t always the approach we take, even as people of faith. We sometimes try to go it alone. We become tempted to think our salvation and peace on earth rest on our own efforts alone. But the reality is that branches will not grow without nutrition from the vine. So if we want to bear fruit, we need to root ourselves deeply in God’s nourishing love.

There is a lot of talk about Spiritual Practices today. Meditation, prayer, yoga, reading, using spiritual affirmations and much more. Spiritual practices are specific activities a person does with a mindfulness about God’s presence with them, and a goal to deepen their relationships with the sacred and the world around them. These Practices help us connect to God. They help us get in touch with our truest selves. They expand the breadth of our experiences, encouraging us to relate in a particular way to other people and the whole creation.

Jesus uses the term “abide” to mean “relax with me,” “connect with me.” Jesus is saying, “let me love you. let me lead you. Let your life be nourished by me. Through life’s painful storms and strained relationships—abide with me. Through temptation and failure—abide with me. Through days you are unable to find words to pray, and days of doubt—abide with me. Wrap

together the loose strands of your life forming a tight cord which becomes deeply rooted in Christ.

The author of John's Gospel uses this story about the vine and the branches as his way of expressing the greatest commandment. Instead of, "love God with all your heart, soul mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself." John says it this way, "if you listen, you will abide in my love, just as I have listened to God and abide in God's love."

This story is a gift to us as we celebrate Holy Communion. Abide is the perfect image for what we share with Jesus as our host.

In the sacrament of Holy Communion, also called the Lord's Supper or Eucharist, which means "thanksgiving," Christians hear, taste, touch and receive the real and true grace of God revealed through Jesus Christ. The United Church of Christ Book of Worship teaches us how this sacrament helps us abide in Christ. We learn Communion is:

- a joyous act of thanksgiving for all God has done, is doing, and will do for the redeeming of creation.
- It is a sacred time of remembering the crucified and risen Christ, a living sign of Christ's sacrifice in which Christ is truly present to all who eat and drink;
- Communion is an earnest prayer for the presence of the Holy Spirit to unite those who partake with the Risen Christ and with each other, and to restore creation, making all things new;
- It is an intimate experience of fellowship in which the whole church in every time and place is present and divisions are overcome;
- And finally, it is a hopeful sign of the promised Realm of God marked by justice, love and peace.

Did you know that all of that was happening during Communion?

It was David's first communion, and everything was ready. The candles in the chancel had been lit, and the special banners hung in the sanctuary. A family brought the bread they had baked on Saturday and placed it carefully in the worship space beside the jug of grape juice.

As the worship service began, David sat with his family in the pew near the front of the church. He watched intently as the bread and juice were shared. As the bread and juice were passed down the pews, David's Mother offered him the bread and said, "The bread of life, David," and he eagerly took a piece. Then David passed the bread to his father and said, "The bread of life, Dad." David did the same with the trays of juice glasses.

This special meal was new to David, but as he took part in the celebration, he felt loved and special, and a part of Jesus' family.

Some may wonder if young David understood what he was doing? In response I would ask if any of us fully understand the mystery of God's present in the sacrament of Holy Communion. What we recognize is that we belong, we are loved, we are rooted in Christ and connected to our brothers and sisters.

What we know in our heart is that we "abide" in Christ, and Christ in us.

Do you remember your first communion? Or maybe you remember a special communion in your life? Each time we share this sacred meal, made of simple elements, it gives us strength, and nourishment, and builds an ever-stronger sense of belonging to Christ and to each other.

Today we will share this meal, we will extend our roots deeper into the Good Vine, Jesus the Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen