



Grafting

MAY 9, 2021 | JOHN 15:1-11

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We are very blessed here in Canada to be surrounded by nature and wide-open spaces. Here in southwestern Ontario, we're especially close to those wide-open fields and valleys; drive fifteen minutes out of any city, and you've got farmland stretching as far the eye can see, crops and livestock, orchards and even vineyards. We have lots of room to grow all kinds of delicious things to eat. Not so in Japan; there, people have to cope with a chronic shortage of agricultural land and garden space. A few years ago, an elderly Japanese gardener became briefly famous for having a very diverse crop of fruit in a very small space – eleven varieties of oranges, lemons and other citrus fruit – all from one tree. You heard correctly – eleven different kinds of fruit, all from one single tree. How did he manage it? Well, it took thirty years of hard and careful work, grafting ten branches of new varieties, one by one, onto his tree. Grafting is a fascinating technique; my family has started using it to save some of our heritage apple tree varieties. You need a healthy, hardy tree and a freshly-cut branch from another. My mom's got a neat little tool that makes a deep notch in the tree and then flipped around, makes another cut on the branch that will fit the notch perfectly, like a lock and key. Fit them together, protect the cuts with wax to keep out water and insects, and soon, you have it: a new, different branch, capable of producing its own kind of fruit, growing on your old tree.

Jesus used a lot of agricultural images in his teachings, and today's gospel story elaborates on a particularly beautiful one: the vine and branches, carefully tended by the gardener. John 15 is part of Jesus' last conversation with his disciples before his arrest and death. After sharing a meal together, Jesus and his closest friend and followers spent one last, long evening in one another's company. We can imagine the warmth and companionship of a darkening room, lamplight, easy conversation between trusted friends, Jesus sharing more and more deeply about what it meant to follow him and believe; sharing cups of wine, perhaps, too, that inspired Jesus to use this vineyard metaphor for what it means to abide.

There is a very well-known and beloved hymn, *Abide with Me*, that usually springs to mind when we read this passage. And as peaceful and comforting as that hymn is, it's about endings and a different kind of abiding than what Jesus is talking about here. This kind of abiding is about growth and action, new

beginnings and rich harvests, in the context of a very special relationship among gardener and vine and branch, among God, Jesus and us. There are two qualities of that relationship that leap anew from this familiar passage of Scripture this week.

The first is that we cannot “go it alone” in our spiritual lives; no branch can bear fruit by itself. But the push to “go it alone” in our North American culture is strong. Being independent and self-reliant, having personal ambition, not needing help or support from anyone...these are qualities that are highly valued and admired in our society. We’re rewarded for them at work and at school, in organisations that we’re part of, even within our own families.

Carried over into our spiritual life, though, that kind of drive for self-sufficient standing alone acts against our spiritual growth. The kind of relationship Jesus is describing here stands over and against self-reliance and independence; a branch floating off on its own, un-grafted into the vine, will never bear fruit... indeed, it may even be among the first to be gathered up from the ground by the gardener.

If we do not abide in Jesus and he in us, like the lock and key snug fit of a graft, neither our inner nor outer life will bear fruit. The goal is to not precisely to *recognise* that we need Jesus, to recognise that we ought to be dependent upon on God. Rather, the goal is to *be* totally reliant on him; dependent, yes, but also inter-related, mutually abiding in each other, Jesus and us, relying on our triune God for everything: companionship, guidance, hope, purpose, strength, compassion, even life.

It is no secret that one can be deeply engaged in the things of the Church in publicly obvious ways, and yet what’s being done might not be truly connected to Jesus. One of my aunts lives in a big, old farmhouse with high ceilings and generous rooms. Every Christmas, her husband cuts her a huge tree from their own forest and she decorates it beautifully – she’s had perfect Christmas trees from when I was a little girl right up to today. But the secret to her full, luxurious tree is not finding the perfect tree with a perfect array of branches. Not at all! For every bare spot on the tree, her husband carefully drills a hole into the trunk and secures a branch from another evergreen tree, making sure that the decorations can be evenly placed across the whole tree. The effect is beautiful – the new fake-real branches do their job – but they are not part of the tree, not really. They are not grafted into it, and they are not well-fed by the trunk as it takes in water from the container at its base. It looks like a real

connected branch on the tree, it's doing the same work as the other branches, but it hasn't become part of the tree – not really. And it's very possible for us to be fully active in the church, working in ways that look right and accomplish the same tasks...and not be abiding in Christ, or experience him abiding in us; to not be grafted onto the vine that feeds and supports and sustains. It's an important point for self-examination, reflecting on our point of connection, our graft, with Jesus... lest we be pruned off or eventually fall away like the branches on my aunt's Christmas tree, to be picked up by the gardener as he cleans up his vineyard.

Relying on the vine, becoming totally reliant on God, on Jesus, is not an easy thing. It is a process, an experience – not a one-time request. Handing ourselves over entirely to Jesus, not holding anything back, becoming truly and permanently grown into and connected with the vine...looks good on paper or sounds good when we hear it said, but the reality of it is challenging, and it happens in gardener's time: across seasons and years of growth and careful pruning. And like the turn of the seasons, our connection with Jesus, our reliance on him, is from time to time, given a hard shake by the wind and snow, by drought and heavy rain.

Abiding in Christ isn't a free ride. There are expectations to our abiding – produce fruit or be pruned, even cut away entirely. The gardeners and farmers among us will know that a good pruning is absolutely necessary for a fruit tree or shrub...but it can be a bit nerve-racking, too, cutting back once-productive branches for a greater and unseen future good of a richer harvest and a more beautiful tree, a season or two down the road.

Total reliance is the first quality of the relationship among God and Jesus and ourselves; the second is two-way communication! Abiding in Christ establishes a line of communication between humanity and the divine that cannot exist outside of this mutual abiding – Christ in us and we in him. Jesus invites those who are intent on abiding in him, on being grafted into him, to “ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Asking can only be done as part of the abiding, since it involves something quite concrete: Christ's words must abide in us, too. “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, then ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

Let's linger over this statement for a moment. What does it mean when Jesus says, his words must abide in us? Well, Jesus' words are what he says! His teachings, his parables, his answers to questions and the questions he asks.

And we find those words in the Bible, in long, unbroken sermons, like the Sermon on the Mount; in conversations with ordinary men and women as he taught and healed and travelled across Galilee; in long, intimate evenings like this one, with his closest friends as they lingered over cups of wine after a good meal. Jesus' words change people, inside and out: healing their bodies and minds, transforming their way of looking at the world, teaching them how to follow him and live the way God wants us to. So Jesus' words abiding in us means that his teaching continues to be present in our hearts and minds, shaping our thoughts and our lives, informing what we ask for, when we pray.

Jesus invites us to ask, to pray, in the spirit of abiding, in full awareness of and with our character being transformed by his words. And the response will come for two reasons, too. The giving of good things to those who abide in Christ will reveal God's power and love in the presence of others, who may not believe, witnessing to those who doubt or wonder that God acts generously in the lives of those who abide in Jesus. And further, as a result of human asking and divine giving, Jesus says we become his disciples. The asking and answering both confirm and are part of the process of becoming disciples, part of how we grow and bear fruit, part of how we abide.

Abiding in Christ is very much like being grafted into the vine, being connected to Christ in a manner that sustains us, that requires a flow of communication, back and forth between Christ and us, like sap between vine and branch. We are cut cleanly away from the trees we've been growing on; the vine is likewise cut, notched to make a space that fits us tightly, like a lock and key. The graft itself is carefully protected in its early days by wax to keep water and harmful insects away from the vulnerable point of connection – you know, I think that might be where the church comes into this particular metaphor. What do you think – is that our role as a church, a place where we love one another in ways that redeem, to protect and help and support new or young or shaking branches? Over time, new graft and ancient vine merge together, and we are fed by the life-giving sap of grace that flows from Jesus to us, the graft made strong and fruitful by a constant, mutual exchange of asking and giving.

And that is the overall goal, of course, of grafting us onto the vine, that we become fruitful disciples, that the connection between Christ and us becomes a true and mutual abiding, Christ in us and we in him. But today, I invite you to consider your graft. It's a cool, grey sort of weekend, so find a nice, cozy spot to sit and reflect on your life abiding in Christ.

Christian philosopher Soren Kierkegaard once wrote that “life can only be understood backwards, but must be lived forwards.” Looking back is part of how we grow, how we self-prune a little, and how we move forward well. Do you rely fully on God? And really, that’s a question of trust and a conscious effort to turn to God, again and again, day after day. Is your graft grown over, inseparable from the vine? Or are you like one of those fill-in-the-gap branches, stuck into my aunt’s Christmas tree, doing the work but suffering from the lack of connection, destined to fall away? Do Christ’s words abide in you? Do you return to his teachings, examining them often, holding them up to the light and turning them this way and that, to see how they look and what effect they have, in different moments and situations? Are you changed, are you being transformed, because you’ve been grafted in? Remember that even the most venerable, well-established branches shed their leaves and grow new ones, every springtime; change and growth are part of discipleship, part of how we know that we abide in Jesus, and he abides in us.

One of the most remarkable things about our Christian faith, I think, is the invitation to relationship that God has always extended to us, nevermore completely and easily than through Jesus. On that long, last evening before his arrest, warmed by lamplight and full stomachs and easy conversation, Jesus and his friends tended to the graft, the relationship that existed between them. How extraordinary that we are, today, invited into that same kind of life-giving, abundant relationship with Jesus, too. Thanks be to God! Amen.