

Sunday, October 27, 2018

Rev. Robert W. Brown

**SERMON**

*The Fullness of Abiding Joy*

SCRIPTURE INTRODUCTION:

To speak of God and things transcendent, we are always limited to metaphors, allegories, and symbols. No language will ever be adequate to describe the Holy. Jesus was masterful in using everyday familiar things that could be understood as solid clues that reliably point toward the nature and essence of an entirely indefinable and ineffable God.

In today's scripture, from the Gospel of John, Jesus is meeting with his disciples for what he knows will be the last time. He wants to sum up all they have seen and heard these last 3 years and leave them with a way forward. Once again, he turns to a brilliant metaphor that is so vivid that it becomes a primary lens that can focus our understanding of who Jesus actually is and how we are able to stay connected to the invisible transcendent flow of Spirit.

Hear these words of Jesus from the Gospel of John Chapter 15.

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**SCRIPTURE:**

[Jesus said,]

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.  
He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.  
Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

**You** have already been cleansed  
by the word that I have spoken to you.

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.

I 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.

Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away  
like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered,  
thrown into the fire, and burned.

If you abide in me, and my words abide in you,  
ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

My Father is glorified by this,  
that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.  
As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you;  
abide in my love.

If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love,  
just as I have kept my Father's commandments  
and abide in his love.

I have said these things to you so that my **joy** may be in you,  
and that **your joy** may be complete.

'This is my commandment,  
that you love one another as I have loved you.

No one has greater love than this,  
to lay down one's life for one's friends.



During the month of October, Jean and I have been zeroing in on a phrase taken from the TriCon Vision Statement. "God is calling TriCon Church to be a nurturing community of faith that honors God through service and mission." Exactly what do we mean by service and mission? What can we learn through scripture that might help us be more intentional in our approach to service and mission?

Will you pray with me?

*God of love, plant us in the soil of your grace.*

*Nurture us with the strength of Christ, the vine of everlasting life.*

*Enlighten us with the wisdom of your Spirit, which flows through us today.*

*Abide in us, that we may abide in you and live in your love.*

*And, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be pleasing and acceptable to you, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.*

I love a clear metaphor. One that is easy to follow, an allegory that hits the nail squarely on the head. Remember that famous anti-drug commercial. It was a rugged looking guy standing in front of a kitchen stove. He looks deep into the lens, holds up an egg and says sternly, "This is your brain." He then smashes the egg into a sizzling frying pan. "This is you brain on drugs...any questions?"

While perhaps not as dramatic, Jesus paints a clear image as well.

*"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."*

Any questions? If you were raised around gardens as I did, you learned the wisdom of pruning before you were 5 years old.

Jesus is clearly teaching us that if you truly want to grow into the fullness of life, the authentic life that God has uniquely created only for you, it is essential that you stay connected to the source of all life. This is where we draw our strength and find our vitality. Apart from the nutrition that that flows freely through the deep root structure and thick vine, Jesus says, we can do nothing. "You have ONE job", he says, "Bear the fruit of the vine."

He then expands the idea. "*Abide in me. Abide in my love.*" Abide is a great word. It means to remain, to stay, to linger. There is a real ease about it. If there is any urgency as we abide, it's not up to the branch to resolve it. That's the gardener's job. All we need to do is to linger, in the love Jesus offers. Sounds great doesn't it?

Well, to be quite honest, my problem is that I really want to be the gardener. I want to be the landscape architect of my world and I don't think I'm alone in that. From an early age, we are taught that we can write our own life story, a triumphant tale of courage that overcomes every obstacle. A story where bravery endures any loss, and stoic willpower can neutralize any pain. For some of us there might even be a chapter where we successfully learn to compensate for our untreatable disability, only to emerge stronger and wiser. We are told that through our own relentless efforts at self-improvement and unwavering self-discipline, we will learn to make only healthy choices. I was told that I had actually had the power and agency to become the hero of my own story. And I bought it. Many of us who are white and privileged buy it. And what's worse, we think that this is the narrative God wants us to write. It's an easy sell. We were given this privilege, education and position in society to make a difference in this world. It's our obligation to help the poor and our duty to serve the needy for the sake of God. So we get real busy doing the holy work, toiling as hard as we can in the garden of service and mission.

But, that is not what Jesus is saying here at all! He is saying that if you really want to bear the holy fruit, if you really want to do the holy work, put down your heavy tools and let the gardener be in charge. Our primary job is to stay connected to the source of all things. Our one job is to turn our energy and attention to abiding in God's love. Only then will we begin to really know how to love one another the way that God loves us.

Jesus said, "*These things I have spoken to you, so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.*" Joy is how we know we are connected firmly to the vine. It turns out that this entire project is not at all about burdensome duty or the frenzied fulfillment of exhaustive obligations. God is not some personal trainer demanding that you to push through ten more reps.

It's about finding an unspeakable joy that is ignited when we stay close to Jesus and learn to truly love one another, not fix one another. To linger with Jesus is to experience deep and abiding joy. The original story arc that drives us toward dogged perfectionism and the relentless struggle to prove our worthiness is exchanged for a more authentic story about our imperfection, undisciplined weakness, and the extraordinary discovery of humility emerging through the agonizing fire of failure. This is a story about the power of grace. It's a new story that undeniably demonstrates, beyond any doubt that you are **not** the hero in this narrative. You are **not** the gardener. You and I are just another common branch,

lingering in this glorious vineyard, bearing only the good fruit that God created us to bear. In this story, grace is not an abstraction it is our lived experience.

It turns out that God's vision for this church is not at all about how hard we can work for God, or how quickly we can check off the tasks of obligation. Jesus says that it's about living into the fullness of his joy, the joy of his company, the joy of his grace, the joy that comes from loving someone just as they are, not as you think they should be. The joy that comes from lifting up God's justice, and even when the inevitable storms thunder in, threatening defeat and failure, its the edgy joy found in being in solidarity with God's suffering.

To honor God through service and mission is to simply be a branch connected to the cosmic vine, a sheep in God's pasture. We honor God through service and mission *with* him, *in* him, and *through* him, not *for* him. There are no heavenly merit badges to be awarded for our service, no missionary brownie points to be tallied. No productivity honors. There is only the mutuality of grace, perpetually given and received.

TriCon Church, when our work together is animated by the fullness of joy bubbling up from the depths of our being, we will know that we are truly honoring God through service and mission. Abiding joy is God's reliable and sure marker. So let us put down our gardening tools and linger in the love of Jesus, trusting completely that the fullness of Gods abiding joy will always bear the sweetest fruit.