

“Drawn to Reside and Abide”

B, Easter 5; John 15:1-8

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Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

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I. TENDING TO OUR ROOTS

When I was a young pre-teen, I was given a bible for Christmas. The NIV had just come out and that was all the rage! (Show bible) All of us in our Sunday School class and youth group wanted one—we wanted to carry it to church on Sunday and look like our leaders—those brave young adults who took on our squirrely youth ministry and whom we admired greatly.

My friends and I asked our parents for these very specific bibles for Christmas. And we got them!

Inside both covers were several blank pages and we started writing quotes that came to us on those empty, hungry pages. I have those “inspirational thoughts” to this day.

And we *loved* those bibles. And, we highlighted those scripture verses, all throughout the tissue-paper thin pages, and put colored tabs on the edges if we were so inclined. Now, I didn’t *need* the tabs on the various books of the bible. Do you know why? Because Mrs. Meg Dawes, my 3rd grade SS teacher had made *darn* sure we all could recite the books of the Bible, in order, Old Testament (39 books) and New Testament (27) and even use arm motions demonstrating the *size* of the different books. 66 in all!

Mrs. Dawes had been teaching this vital body of knowledge to 3rd graders since God walked the earth, and she had impressive visual aids! Sixty-six—paper-covered boxes of different sizes with the bible book names, all lined up on the counter in the SS room.

And you know what? The bible became a part of us. We learned the names and order and size of the books in 3rd grade. We memorized several passages and went to a workshop that gave an overview of the Great Story (with motions!) in 7th grade. And in 8th grade and High School youth group we carried and highlighted these treasured NIV bibles to Sunday School, church, youth retreats, and church camp. Even taking them to the beach, where they got a little sand inside that lasted for years.

And those quotes and underlines and highlights became the roots of my faith. They highlighted the highpoints of my budding understanding of living life in relationship with God—Creator, Christ Example and Ever-Present Spirit.

I can still quote most of them from memory. They are the infrastructure, rooted deep down in my being—where I turn when life is feeling a little tossed about in the wind, blown to and fro, unstable. I found when I got to seminary that my American Baptist church had given me a true gift in my childhood and youth that many of my colleagues didn’t have.

I not only knew the “classic stories” of the bible and all the fun characters like Jonah and Joseph, Mary and Miriam, but had internalized the bedrock truths—the teachings and prayers of that inspire and infuse and shape one’s life in the faith.

I thought of this bible and these notes this week as I was pondering this passage: “I am the Vine. You are the branches. Remain in me. Stay connected to the Vine and you will bear much fruit. Apart from me you can do nothing. You need to stay attached. For if you don’t, your spirit will wither and even die.

Many years ago, I heard and wrote down a reminder of this truth, in the inside cover of my beloved bible:

“Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me.”

“I can take all the madness the world has to give,
But I won’t last a day without you.”

(homework—that line isn’t in the bible. Where’s in from?)

“Fill me with your spirit, Lord, that my everyday actions may demonstrate that I believe God is love.”

“Life is, most of all, knowing Whose we are and spending our days in that light.”

And, a favorite line I heard a *long* time ago and have thought of many times—especially in light of this passage:

“If you feel far from God, guess who moved?”

II. IN WHOM WE LIVE AND MOVE

Last Sunday, the 4th Sunday of Easter, we considered what it is to “live in God.” To truly grasp what it means that God is the one “in Whom we live, and move and have our being?” If, like the ancient Celts Celts and other forebears in the faith, Native and far across the world, we considered God, the Creator, the Sacred One as an “encompassing Spirit?” Considered that we and everything that is are *in* God. What if we knew, felt, deep in our bones, that God is not separate from us and creation—not *somewhere else* but *right here*?

We asked the question: What if we human creatures experienced life as “Easter People” as eternal and ever-present, abundant life “in God” in Creation, as the fish live in water—totally unaware of any separation between themselves, the water, and life itself?

II. ABIDING? CONNECTING TO THE VINE?

Today, this wonderful passage from Jesus’ teaching in the Gospel of John carries that further. Jesus loved to use metaphors for God, for living in God and even for himself. For how else can we understand the Infinite that is so far beyond our finite minds—than with mind-bending and stretching metaphors?

Remain in Me, and I will remain in you. Just as no branch can bear fruit by itself unless it remains in the vine, neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in Me.

Stay. Abide. Remain.

How do *you* do that? Anyone willing to share?

"Remain in me, as I remain in you," says Jesus. Like a vine remains connected to its branches and the branches receive their very life from the vine. How do you stay connected to your Source of Life? What nourishes your root connection and life sap like the sun, water and air nourishes the branch?

That's a good table topic for Coffee Hour today.

III. PRUNING OFF THE DEAD WOOD

The second question is like unto it: Where does the pruning need to happen in us, so that we can remain healthy, thrive and letting that life-sap flow through?

"I am the real vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He breaks off every branch in me that does not bear fruit, and he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will be clean and bear more fruit.

Any gardener or wine-grower will tell you that pruning is GOOD. Necessary, healthy, life-saving. What's the detritus that has built up in your spiritual branches that needs to be carefully and tenderly cleaned out? What is the dead wood that is not producing fruit that God can help you put aside and toss into the fire?

I won't ask you to share those out loud! De-cluttering our souls is best done with God in private, in prayer. And when the time is right—and ripe!—share the good news of the new fruit with your fellow companions on the journey.

If we're not sure how to do this—how to work with God to clean out the deadwood, or determine what's keeping us from bearing fruit, we can go back to the fish metaphor for guidance.

Mark Nepo, in a thoughtful meditation called *The Way is Hard, but Clear*", encourages us to "consider the fish." He says:

[Naturalists will tell you] "that salmon make their way upstream by bumping repeatedly into blocked pathways until they find where the current is strongest. Somehow they *know* that the unimpeded rush of water means that there is no obstacle there, and so they enter this opening fervently, for though it is the hardest going, the way is clear."

Nepo says we, like salmon, must keep facing the seemingly blocked pathways of our journey and looking for the passage that is powerfully clear. Facing, not avoiding our inner and outer adversities and looking for the strong current *through* to the other side. Salmon show us healthy persistence and a tenacity to keep nosing for the unimpeded way, and then how to work even harder to make it through.

"Like salmon, our way depends not just on facing things head on, but in moving our whole being

through.” With the help of the One in whom we live and move and have our very being.

IV. PRUNING IN ORDER TO MOVE!

The third question before us today is this: How does our congregation remain in the vine? For truly I say to you, these words from Jesus and the gospels, and all of scripture, in fact, are not “*all about me.*” Not just meant for our own, individual spiritual journeys.

The salmon do not swim alone, looking for the way through those blocked pathways, and we do not walk alone on this earth, lonely branches on a solitary vine. But we are a tree, a bush, a whole *bunch* of branches, all connected to the One Vine and growing and thriving together, being tended and nurtured and yes, pruned, together by the Vine Grower.

We have been calling ourselves “The Church on the Move.” We have been listening to the Spirit for wonderful, creative ideas for engaging the community and world around us. Many of those “engaging ways” are already “on the move”—such as the Restoration Innocence Project you’re hearing about today, and the “Family Evening Camp” coming up in June.

We are also looking at the structures and ways we’ve grown in the past that *aren’t* helping us grow now. Looking at the ways of organizing ourselves that aren’t fruitful, to see what needs tweaking in order to thrive.

We’re looking at our *roots* and making darn sure we stay rooted in who we are and who we have always been—trying to dig up and better organize our congregational history so it is not lost or forgotten. Some of our most treasured “roots” live and breathe among us. They sit right there in the pews and around the table with us! This past week at the Women’s Missionary Society Spring Luncheon we celebrated our “nonagenarians.” Those between the ages of 90 and 99! (Did you know that’s what they were called?)

We also highlighted other “originals” of the church and remembered some fun history: SYMNK: Something you may not know! And I’m gonna keep reminding us that we’re coming up on our 140th anniversary in two short years! 2020—let’s celebrate big!

So, how do we remain connected to the vine as a congregation, deeply rooted branches that know who is their Vine and source of life?

We remember our history and what and who has nourished us, where the nutrients come from, how we are sustained together. And then, we branch out—not afraid to reach further, reach out and up and beyond where we’ve been before.

We push through the “blocking pathways,” clean out the clutter, prune the deadwood of stuff. We prune the structures that aren’t giving life anymore, and purge the detritus that has found its way into every corner and cupboard. (Yes, that means being brave

and cleaning the church building—rooms, sheds and cupboards too!)

Not because the Pastor thinks it needs to be done, but in order to truly be a “church on the move”—preparing ourselves to branch out, with what is life-giving and growing, and not afraid to cast off what has become unfruitful dead wood.

V. THE WORD OF GOD TO US!

The original hearers of these words were a community that had been thrown out of the synagogue. They were fearful, feeling rejected by family and friends, and feeling pretty alone and orphaned. They were most definitely feeling “cut down,” pruned in painful ways—not of their own doing.

“But,” says Jesus to them and to *us* in whatever circumstances we find ourselves in, “You’re not being cut down but pruned and cleaned and renewed in essential ways. Making room for Christ to abide in you, as you remain in Christ.”

For, as Bruce Epperly puts it eloquently:
“Christ is the energy of life, flowing through all things, inspiring all things, and energizing all things. When we are connected with the vine, we flourish. Disconnected we wither and die spiritually. We may have to let go of spiritual lumber to allow the fullness of divine energy to flow in and through us. Love abounds, energy abounds, life abounds, all embracing in scope, and ready to give us more than we can ask or imagine.”

VI. CONSTANTLY ABIDING

I found even *more* pertinent quotes for us in this time, in my “bible of many sayings”:

“The future is as bright as the promises of God.”
“You know the way ahead and will always lead your sheep where it is best for them to go.”
“As we give God first place in our lives, our every need will be met. So let us live each day fully persuaded that what God has promised, we will receive.”

And a song:

There’s a peace in my heart that the world never gave,
A peace it cannot take away;
Though the trials of life may surround like a cloud,
I’ve a peace that has come here to stay!

o *Refrain:*

Constantly abiding, Jesus is mine;
Constantly abiding, rapture divine;
He never leaves me lonely, whispers, oh, so kind:
“I will never leave thee”—Jesus is mine.

We are drawn to reside and abide. Called as partners in Christ’s service. Constantly abiding. Let us stay, abide, remain—connected to our Vine and to one another, strong and sure. Amen.

