

## “Abiding on the Vine Together”

May 2, 2021; 9:00 am online; 10:am in Person

John 15:1-8

Congregational UCC, Buena Vista, CO

Rev. Rebecca K. Poos

### I Am the True Vine

**15** “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.

<sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

### GARDENS GROW UNDER THE SNOW!

How is your garden coming? Are we even able (or *allowed*) to play in the dirt yet? Can we start stirring up the soil; plant a seed or two? In this part of the world we call Colorado, the seasons play games with us—every time we think spring is finally springing forth, we soon learn that we’re in that “other season” —“Fools Spring”—Gray, sometimes fluffy white—“why did you put your skis away already?”—kinda spring!

Mother Nature teases us into thinking we can start to consider planting flowers and vegetables—that surely it won’t freeze overnight *again*—we’re full on into warm days and sunshine! Right?

It’s hard to be **patient** when we long for the planting and tilling, tending and watering to commence—in our actual, outdoor “Real Gardens.”

But, there’s good news! For into the midst of our impatient wondering, Jesus comes, reminding us that our *whole life* is really a Garden and there is no end of tending and nurturing, planting and growing in abundance to be enjoyed. Even right now! Even during Fool’s Spring!

“I am the Real Vine, you are the branches. When you’re joined with me and I with you, the relation intimate and organic, the harvest is sure to be abundant. (Jesus)

## COURAGEOUS COMMUNITY

In our Earth Day Worship, back a couple weeks, we reminded ourselves that we are *all* planting and sowing seeds in a Community Garden together—a Garden of the Spirit. The Spirit of Beloved Community.

Today—and all of May—we will dig-in and get our hands in the soil, explore on so many levels what it truly means to come out of a long and dormant winter and see what awaits us—together.

Our theme for May is “Courageous Community.” We will dig-in and delve-in together, not being afraid to get a little earthy as we plunge into the untilled soil. As we dig and explore, we look to our Creator for inspiration and strength, guidance and nurture.

We look courageously, as we seek and notice the signs of new life wanting to spring forth. As we watch for the perennials to reappear, faithful and steadfast; pay attention to the elements—the cold and warmth, sun and rain, fertile patches *and* tall weeds.

## ABIDING IN THE VINE

“Abide in me, as I abide in you!” Jesus calls to us from the Garden. I am the True Vine, and my Father, your Creator and mine, is the Vinegrower.

This would have been a rich and recognizable image for Jesus’ followers in his day. The motif of the vineyard was central to the Jewish faith and *many* faiths in the ancient world.

It is frequently used to portray Israel in the Hebrew Bible. Vines conveyed fruitfulness, dependence, vital union, and yes, pruning.

For Jesus in John’s Gospel to proclaim, “I am the true vine” was *also* a messianic affirmation—a comforting message to his followers:

“I *am* the one God sent to you, as promised.” The True Vine. The Bread of Life. The Life Abundant that you seek.

“And thus, I am the one to dwell in you and you in me, and Father/Mother God is mutually indwelling in us!”

The question before us, in our disciple life, is:

What would such **mutual indwelling** look like in practice? It might look like *Jesus*, and at the same time it would look like *us*—that is, it would look like us being the people God made us to be. It would look like love: incarnate, tangible, down-to-earth, intertwining, intersecting, growing, fruitful, *vibrant* love.

## HOW TO ABIDE

Richard Rohr tells a story of a life-changing week’s retreat at Ghost Ranch in New Mexico with Joanna Macy. Joanna is a brilliant Buddhist teacher, a systems thinker, deep ecologist, and activist for peace, justice, and a healthy environment, still going strong in her 90’s! Not to be slowed down by much of

anything life doles out, she continues to lead us all in a life-sustaining worldview that she calls, “*The Work That Reconnects*.”

Macy suggests that we “abide in the Vine” when we seek deeper connection with the living Earth, including our fellow travelers *on* the earth, in four ways. We might look at these four “stages” as “life stances” or spiritual practices. *If* we truly want to stay connected to our Source; remain in the Vine of Divine Love and be sustained and nourished, Macy says, try this:

- a) *Gratitude*—actively experiencing and expressing our love for life.
- b) *Honoring our pain*—learning how to suffer the pain of the world with others and with the world itself.
- c) *Seeing with new eyes*—this is how we experience our connection with life in all its forms through all the ages.
- d) *Go forth into action* in the world as “**open human beings**,” aware of our mutual belonging in the web of life.

### **CONNECTION CRAVING**

In that placing ourselves smack dab in the web of life and seeing ourselves with new eyes there, experiencing

both the pain and joy of life with gratitude, we connect to the Vine and one another and remain there.

This connection is something all our souls crave—even the most introverted, hibernated souls among us! Where do you crave more connection—with others, with Christ, with yourself? “Coming home to ourselves” is some of the most important spiritual work we do in this life—past, present and future.

How will you seek to connect in meaningful ways in this new season? With safety foremost in mind, of course! How will we consider the collective trauma this season of multiple pandemics has put us through as humanity? How can we be extra gentle with each other as we emerge out of isolation?

Namaste’—the Christ in me greets the Christ in you. That’s a good place to start. Seeing our neighbors and strangers both with the eyes of Christ and the heart that looks upon all it sees with Love.

As a youth, learning about the Bible and the walk of faith in Sunday School, I learned a phrase that has stuck with me a long time: “**If you feel far from God, guess who moved?**”

What is one thing you might do this week, or start to do often, that causes you to feel connected to God? In synch with the Divine? Attached and latched-on to the True Vine?

I found myself re-connecting this week with a friend from 30 years ago, from whom I had been estranged many years. Our life experiences and relationships with others had caused our friendship to grow distant, and the years had not healed the hurt and disappointment.

Wanting to “connect to the Vine” I reached out to her and offered my apologies for whatever I had done or left undone that caused a rift in our friendship and a distance to come between us over the years, and asked her forgiveness. We asked each other for forgiveness from the years of hurt and committed to a fresh start in our “so much wiser and more mature” season of life.

“Remain in me and in my love, and you will remain in love with one another.” (Jesus)

### **PRUNING & CLEANSING & GROWING**

And then, there’s the next verse. Jesus doesn’t stop with that lovely sentiment about abiding in love, I’m afraid.

“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.”

Ah, the Pruning Verse. Maybe this is a good place to start to see through new eyes! How many of you have read or heard this metaphor your whole life as an “uh-oh! I’d better get busy! Look busy, Jesus is coming!” If I’m not bearing fruit for the Lord, I’m gonna get cut off! Trimmed down, curbed-in.

Pruning. Some commentators do consider this “a word of judgment” from Jesus here. But, what if it’s about *growth* instead? And exactly that “seeing with new eyes?”

What if, as Cheryl Lindsay encourages us: “Pruning takes place when we adjust our language to account for the glorious diversity and expansiveness of God’s creation. When we clip off old forms and ways of being that exclude and isolate in favor of opening access and inclusion, we prepare for a greater tomorrow than today.

Well tended gardens get weeded constantly as those elements that ***hinder flourishing*** of the garden are removed, and dead leaves and branches are removed from a still living plant to give it the opportunity to thrive.”

A theologian writer who goes by “Reverend Sue,” talks about how much she always was afraid of this scripture, and outright hated the metaphor of “God as the one who prunes.”

But now it’s become a most encouraging, healing and hopeful image of the spiritual journey. I wonder if *we* might reclaim it in a similar way—I know I’m game to try!

We’ve tended to interpret this in the old way of: “God sends trials to test our faith. Gotta see what we’re made of. See how much we can take.” Like a fraternity hazing ritual! That’s not a very healthy image of God. As if our Loving Creator is One who:

“sends certain experiences, including disasters, so that we will **learn**, that we will be pruned, that we will be cleansed and refined...this suggests that a good God does bad things—even if for an eventual good outcome.”

Reverend Sue suggests, instead:

“Understanding that because everything is in God and God is in everything, that all events—good and bad, pleasurable and painful, life and death itself—*all* have the capacity to be part of our growth and development and our eventual joy making.”

Paul’s words echo: “that nothing will be able to **separate** us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” And we can be “likewise convinced that no thing or event need separate *us* from the love of God when we remain abiding in God’s love. All experiences can lead us deeper into the heart of God and lead to our flourishing.”

And, an important anti-dote to that misguided interpretation, is that we certainly don’t need to “seek out” these experiences, in order to test ourselves and “let God test us!”

Life does that enough, don’tcha think? The ups and downs of daily life visit *enough* experiences upon us, to give ample opportunity to be “pruned and cleansed, humbled and wounded, reformed and re-created.”

I love this perspective on pruning—it changes everything! We can begin to look at all of life—in its seasons of death and resurrection, planting, sowing, reaping, through new lenses of hope and promise.

We can consider ALL the big and small losses and griefs we experience as a way to draw us closer to God. Not judgment, but invitation to relationship.

Reverend Sue brings this metaphor home to our Life Garden:

“Loss and grief initiate us *even* deeper into the love of God. It is the *presence* of God that makes these wounding experiences life-giving rather than destructive, pruning rather than decimating, and that helps us bear fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self control.

Think of pruning as a *lightening of the load*, of the removal of dead weight, of what anchors us in the too small present, rather than random loss (although it can be that too). And in that great and ultimate pruning—the dying process itself—let us trust that this, too, is for our completion in joy so that we may travel lightly home.”

Where might we eagerly look to our Maker for pruning, in that light? I imagine there are many aspects of our own lives and our lives in community that could benefit from a real, healthy, growth-inspiring pruning.

What needs to be cut down in and around us, so that it can be ***renewed for flourishing?***

What do we fail to prune because we’re afraid it will die? Where have we seen this all wrong—it’s not about being cut off for not bearing fruit, but being “grafted on” and filled, nourished, enlivened, so that we and all in this world can live more abundantly?

## **WE'RE NOT IN THIS ALONE**

Finally, more good news! We're not in this alone.

It's not all up to the branches to do the "clinging on" and remaining connected to the Vine. It's not conditional at all with God: "You gotta hold on here, and bear good fruit—good luck!"

Jesus shares the expectation that yes, a disciple will stay connected and bear much good fruit. But, he also holds the expectation *and* assurance that **God** will hold onto us, never letting go. *That the Vine Itself will act and remain—in order to encourage, invite, and amplify fruitfulness.*

### **John 15, in a New Lens**

The Inclusive Bible, a contemporary translation, sheds another twist on this passage. Instead of "abiding"—a word we might not use everyday, we are encouraged to "LIVE ON!"

If you LIVE ON in me, (says Jesus)  
and my words live on in you....  
you will bear much fruit.  
As my Abba has loved me, so have I loved you.  
LIVE ONE in my love.

And you WILL live on in my love.  
I tell you all this that my joy may be yours,  
and your joy may be complete.  
This is my commandment:  
Live on in me, and Love one another as I have loved you.  
Amen.