

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

Reflections for Emmaus Groups at St. Stephen's Church, Richmond, Virginia

Preparing for Sunday, April 29, 2018 // Easter 5, Year B

The Gospel: John 15:1-8

Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 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."

Background and general observations

The image of the people of God as a vine, or as a vineyard, is a common image in the Hebrew Bible. God's message to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah reads, "I have planted you as a choice vine." (Jeremiah 2:21) Other prophets use a similar image, and in the Psalms we read, "You brought a vine out of Egypt." (Psalm 80:8). So, in this lesson, Jesus is appropriating an image that would be well-known to his Jewish audience.

Interestingly, though, the Old Testament use of the vine as an image for the people of God is almost always negative. That is, the vine has grown wild and out of control; it has not been cultivated and pruned, so it does not bear fruit; and the soft wood of a vine is useless—it is not even suitable to be brought to the temple to be burned for altar sacrifices. A fruitless vine, therefore, is good for nothing except to be thrown away or heaped onto a bonfire.

Jesus takes this image of the vine that is so often used negatively in the Hebrew Bible and gives it a new twist: Jesus is the vine. And we are fruitful to the extent that we remain connected to him and "abide" in him. One has the impression that it is the vine's relationship to the vinegrower that makes the vine fruitful. In other words, Jesus stays in constant contact with the Father—he dwells in him—which makes Jesus who he is. Therefore, when we remain in such a relationship with Jesus, we are fruitful; we are productive, worthy, helpful, imaginative.

The problem, of course, is that some of the branches do not bear fruit; these are pruned, so that the useless branches do not drain life away from the rest of the vine. This passage may have us thinking metaphorically about those things that have been pruned out of our life in order that we become more fruitful—more generous, more loving, more forgiving. What in your life needs pruning now? What is stifling the flow of God's life, love, and energy into you and preventing fruitfulness?

Ideas for discussing the application of this lesson to our daily lives

1. When this passage is read in the context of the chapters which immediately precede it—Chapter 14, which emphasizes loving Jesus, and Chapter 13, which emphasizes loving each other—we understand that love is the fruit which is expected of the branches. In other words, our true life is a life that is connected to and draws its energy, growth, and vitality from love. We know that the First Epistle of John says, "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone

who loves is born of God and knows God.... God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” (1 John 4:7, 16)

Does this amplify the image of the vine and branches for you? Have you had the experience of “dwelling” in love (not momentary romantic love, but a more mature, self-giving and self-forgetful love) and sensed the presence of God in this experience? How can one remain connected to that kind of love?

2. Consider what it means to “abide” in another person, and for another person to “abide” in you. Who has been such a powerful influence that he or she has “abided” in you? Do you have a sense that you “abide” in someone else? How do we cultivate and nourish such abiding presences? Consider what Jesus might have meant about us abiding in him. How do we cultivate Jesus’ abiding presence in us?
3. Jesus made a point of regularly staying in touch with God, removing himself to a lonely place for prayer and quiet communion with the Divine. This constant contact with God—this dwelling, this abiding—is what made Jesus who he was. How do you attempt to stay in constant contact with the vine?

When have you attempted to go it alone, only to discover over time that you were withering, like a branch that has been cut off from the vine?

What have you had to prune from your own life in order to be a better version of yourself? How have you managed this pruning? Some pruning may be painful—pruning your anger, for example, may prove as difficult an exercise as pruning your drinking, or pruning your impatience. How have you found support and strength? What do you need in order to sustain your new growth?

4. Think of a time when you fell to temptation, or perhaps a time when you experienced depression or darkness or isolation, and your life seemed to spiral downward. Was there someone who reached out to you and rescued you? Did you have a sense that as long as you stayed close to this person (that is, “abided” with that person), you were being healed or coming back to life? Was there a sense that your nearness to this loved one meant hope?

Consider how our lives are shaped for the better by staying connected to certain people or groups. A mentor, for example, reminds you of what it means to be a good person, so you keep a picture of that person in your home or office. That person “abides” with you and in you. Or consider how somehow in recovery from addiction sometimes feels as if he or she can stay clean, sober and healthy as long as he or she stays connected to their recovery group, as long as that person “abides” in those that support him or her.

We might say that our lives remain lovely, as long as we stay close to loveliness or abide in loveliness. Our lives remain healthy and strong, as long as we stay connected to others who are healthy and strong.

Where must you “abide,” or who must “abide” in you, in order for you to stay healthy and whole, fruitful and loving? Do you have a sense that you are living your life in such a way that you can be

the sort of person others want to keep close—or remember or “abide” in—so that they, too, can be as loving, as generous, as kind?

5. This lesson might be summarized this way: “those that bear fruit bring glory to God.” It might also be said that those who bear fruit serve as examples and attract the attention of others who want to be fruitful also, so that they might bring glory to God, too. It seems a rich opportunity to consider our responsibilities to one another, particularly as Christians.

How could Jesus’ teaching on pruning apply to a church community? How do you see our parish being pruned—or do you?—in order for us to bear more fruit as a community? How are we modeling our fruitfulness for others? How can we be better?