

April 29 2018

John 15:1-8

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### Jesus the True Vine

'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.

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

The gospel of John is challenging. You can hear these words in really different ways.

It could feel like a threat. Abide in me or else I'll throw you into the fire, and you can burn and die! Jesus as angry and vengeful god. It almost sounds like he's holding a knife to our throats and saying: Do what I say!

But there is another way to hear this passage. And that is not to hear it as a promise of punishment. But to hear it as a promise of the blessings of relationship with God - and ***description*** of what life without Jesus is like. We can with God know the fruits of peace and patience and joy and fullness of life. And without God - life can feel barren and desolate. It can feel like there is nothing good out there, no one you can depend on. People are awful, and life is brutal. Hunker down until you die.

Jesus does suggest that even with God there will be pruning – we will know hard times and they will change us - but when we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from his love and acceptance, when we run or hide from what God asks, or think we can do it on our own or decide to stand alone – then hard times can destroy us. Branches don't do that well when separated from the vine. They may bloom for a moment, but when people lose sight of God's love and of the necessity of connecting to others, it can be soul destroying.

David Lose reminds us of the context of this passage. Jesus is about to die and is preparing his disciples for his departure. He wants to assure them of his presence, even when life gets hard. Historically, this passage was put on paper by John almost 70 years after the death of Jesus. At this time, Jews are being persecuted. The temple in Jerusalem has been destroyed. Jews who embrace Christ are being rejected by family and friends. And John, through his retelling of Jesus' words of farewell and comfort, is offering a way to interpret their experience. They are not being punished; they are being pruned. That is what hard life experiences do. They aren't the only way to learn and grow as Christians, but you do learn and grow from them.

AND at the same time, John is reminding them: Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go.

These words have really resonated with people of faith through the years. Think about those living through the plagues when everyone around was dying from disease. Or wars. Or slavery. It's not punishment, but if we trust God is with us, we can survive and maybe even learn something in the process - pruning. (Huge difference between natural consequences for doing something stupid, and assuming every bad thing is punishment from God.)

Think about those who are struggling today. Maybe you are the one struggling today. Or maybe it's your friend, family, neighbor or co-worker.

There are countless examples of persons who feel cut down by life. John reminds them: Jesus is with you, abiding in you, holding onto you, loving you, and will not let you go. Which means that what feels like punishment or a death cut is just pruning, that growth is ahead, that new life will come.

Jesus' promise is there is a profound difference in how we experience life when we are connected to him. And although we may see lots of people not connected to Christ seeming to do okay, we do get the idea that when we are not connected to love, we wither. We **know** what it is like to have a relationship end and feel cut off.

We know what it feels like to be lonely. We have lost a family member or a friend and it's left a hole in our life. Or we moved somewhere new and we know no one. Or we have entered a new community and had no one to sit with at potlucks after church.

Some of us have rarely known loneliness, but most of us have at some point in our lives felt like the odd person out. Felt like we see things differently than everyone else, and we must be weird. Felt like a fish out of water because everyone else in a room seems to belong and we're the only one who doesn't. Everyone else seems to have someone to talk to and no one is going to come up and talk to us cuz there's obviously something wrong with us cuz no one is talking to us. Or everyone else seems to have something to do on Friday nights and as much as we enjoy reading and walking and Netflix we actually also might like someone to talk to.

I listened to stories about loneliness this week. Story Corps, a national archive of people's stories, had a number of people who spoke about loneliness after loss, and how many of them had to fight through this unbelievable welter of emotions on their journey after loss. And about how important it was to them to fight loneliness.

There were also stories of people who had been bullied for who they were, and how alone they felt. One story was told by a 55-year-old man who was bullied for being gay. Some of the guys at his school had deliberately smashed his hand in a car door. He lost part of his finger because of that. But he couldn't tell his parents he was gay and being tortured for it. He felt so alone. Forty years later he carries the scar of that time with him every time he sees that finger.

You may have heard that in January, Great Britain created a new post. They now have a minister of loneliness. When Theresa May announced this new position, she cited research which shows more than 9 million people in Britain always or often feel lonely. That is one in six. Often or always. At the time of this survey,

200,000 elderly people in Britain had not had a conversation with a friend or relative in over a month.

The Surgeon General of the United States has written about loneliness. Rates of loneliness have doubled here since the 1980s. Over 40% of adults in America report feeling lonely. Nearly 43 million Americans over the age of 45 suffer from chronic loneliness. And we aren't just talking about the elderly who are losing friends to death. The New York Times names the following groups as people who often experience loneliness: new parents, children, disabled, refugees... Lots of people feel real isolation and loneliness at work... university students often feel rejected and like they don't fit in...

And there are consequences for our health. Social isolation could be worse for a person's health than smoking fifteen cigarettes a day.

There is some serious thought being given to how to address pervasive social isolation. And there is real doubt loneliness can be cured by simply inviting people to reach out to their neighbors. Thus, the ministry office in England. Comedian Steven Colbert said: "This is so British," he said. "They've defined this incredibly human problem and come up with the most cold, bureaucratic solution."

All joking aside, what we hear is: how broken we are without connection. And we know this. We know how much it wrecks us to lose people we love. Connection counts. Disconnection hurts.

At the same time so many of us don't feel connected. Here's one of many memes on loneliness that speaks to this. (slide)

The thing is - there is a balance that is important. For us not to feel alone we need to believe that we are lovable in all our uniqueness. Without this sense that we can be loved - and that others can be loved in all their uniqueness - we are all hopeless loners.

Do we need to find people who can see us and love us? Yes. Do we need to reach out to others to see and love them? Yes. Is connection hard? Yes.

Katherine Lewis wonders how Jesus felt when he said these words to his disciples about staying connected. She wonders how much it pained him to think about

leaving these people he loved, and to know some of his friends might leave him. After all, Judas had already left, and Peter is going to deny him for a while.

Jesus is so human here. Saying goodbye is hard. That change, the loss of belonging, the loss of being needed, the loss of those who center us - it is hard. Without that connection, of the vine with the branches, of the branches with the vine, there is a wilting, a waning, a wanting. I know that withering. Many of you do too.

These words are comfort, not condemnation. That are reassurance and not rejection. With Jesus, being connected to Jesus, to the vine, a life filled with resurrection all around is possible.

A performance artist told the curator at a museum recently that she was going to just sit in a chair at a table, with an empty chair in front of it, and anyone from the public could come and sit as long as they wanted. The curator told her, "That's ridiculous, you know, this is New York, this chair will be empty, nobody has time to sit in front of you."

She did it for three months. Eight hours every day. Part way through the process she removed the table so there was no barrier. She thinks even 10 or 15 years ago people would not have responded. But now, people actually waited for hours to sit in front of her.

She believes that sitting in front of her people can't escape. They have to look at her and make a connection. And she saw so much pain and loneliness. She said it's incredible what you see when you look in somebody else's eyes, without talking. She was changed by that experience. "And I understood when I stood up from that chair after three months, I am not the same anymore. And I understood that I have a very strong mission, that I have to communicate this experience to everybody." She goes around the country and invites people to look at the person sitting next to them in silence for two minutes.... Because we need connection.

We do not have to feel like life is barren and desolate and there is nothing good out there and no one we can depend on. Jesus' words of comfort and presence were not just for his disciples. They are for you, too, for he is with you and for

you and will not let you go. These words are pure promise, full of grace and presence.

