

## Abide in Me

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Our text is from the Gospel reading. **Jesus said, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”** Here ends the text.

A little girl was playing outside when she saw her neighbor working in the back yard among his rose bushes. She went over and watched him clip away at some of the branches. “Mr. Johnson,” she asked, “what are you doing?” Mr. Johnson replied, “I’m pruning my rose bushes so there’ll be more roses.” “How does cutting off branches give you more roses?” she asked. Mr. Johnson bent down and cut off a branch low to the ground. “Well this one here was just a sucker. It wasn’t bearing any roses at all. It had reverted back to its wild state. It only grows longer and thicker without branching out and just saps the rest of the bush, so I cut it off. Here’s another branch that’s already dead. I’ll cut that one off too. But these branches here are alive and haven’t gone wild. They’re bearing roses like they should. These I don’t cut totally off, but I prune them back just above the last bud. Then they branch out and bear even more roses.” The little girl watched Mr. Johnson prune another branch with his clippers. “Ouch,” she said. “Doesn’t that hurt the branch?” “Well, I suppose initially it does. It oozes a little sap. But it’s still connected to the trunk of the bush. It’s still alive. And when I prune it, it doesn’t take the sap from the trunk to just grow itself longer, but it uses the sap to produce more roses.”

A few weeks later the little girl ran over to Mr. Johnson’s again. He was picking up the branches which he had cut off. They were now brown and brittle and dead. He loaded them in his wheelbarrow and took them over to his burn pile where he threw them into the fire. But she noticed that the branches which were pruned, which were still connected to the trunk, were alive and bearing even more roses than before.

In our Gospel reading today, Jesus said to his disciples, **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away.”** Now you might think to yourself, “If that’s the case, if God takes away every branch that isn’t bearing fruit, then I’d better get busy. I’d better get busy bearing fruit. I’d better get busy doing some good works and deeds. But let me tell you, it doesn’t matter what wonderful fruit you think you’re bearing, if you’re not in the vine, you’re not bearing any fruit. It doesn’t matter how nice and pleasant you are to others. It doesn’t matter how philanthropic you are, how much you give to charitable causes. It doesn’t matter how religious you are, how much you go to church or how many times a day you pray. It doesn’t matter how much you’ve helped the community or what civic awards you’ve won. If you don’t abide in the vine, if you don’t abide in Jesus Christ, you’re not bearing fruit. In fact, you can’t bear fruit. It’s impossible to bear fruit. Jesus said, **“As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.”** A branch separated from the vine will never spawn fruit by itself. The world may praise your good deeds, but if you don’t abide in Christ, those works are only thorns and brittle twigs. Jesus said, **“For apart from me you can do nothing.”** You may be connected to a church in a some way, attend regularly somewhere, be on the roles, but if you’re not in Christ, you’re just a sucker branch that has gone wild, that has returned to it’s natural sinful state. Apart from Christ, everything you do can only stem from yourself, from only your sinful motives. You only get thicker and longer and thornier, but you don’t bear fruit because you don’t abide in Christ. And Jesus said, **“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.”** A day will come when God will take away all those branches that don’t abide in Christ. It might be judgment day or the day of their death. But all those branches that aren’t in Christ will be gathered and thrown into the fire of hell.

And so we shouldn't be so worried about our fruit. We shouldn't run around like fruit inspectors, inspecting our fruit or the fruit of others, sniffing and squeezing and tapping to see how good it is, or what bruises and blemishes we can find. No, we should be concerned about whether we abide in the vine, whether we abide in Christ. Jesus said, "**Abide in me, and I in you.**" But how do we abide in Christ and he in us?

Shortly after Jesus spoke these words to his disciples, he was arrested, led away, tried, and crucified. He was cut off and left as a dead stump. But after three days he sprang forth alive and lush. He is the Resurrection. He is the living, true vine. And he gives life to his branches. He gives life to us, Christians who believe in him. We sprout out from Jesus, born from the water of baptism and the Word of God. We receive our vitality and strength from Him. Jesus feeds us and nourishes us through his Word of the Gospel, the Word that we are cleansed of all our sins, because he was cut off and crucified for us. Jesus told his disciples, "**Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.**" We stay connected to Jesus, we abide in him, through faith. We believe in him. We believe his Word. We abide in Christ through faith in him, and he abides in us through his Word.

And so we don't abide in Christ by first producing fruit or good deeds. Fruit doesn't connect the branch to the vine. The order isn't fruit, then branch, then vine. The order is vine, then branch, then fruit. If the branch is in the vine, the branch will bear fruit. Jesus said, "**I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.**" It doesn't matter how lowly or plain or unnoticed. A mother changing her baby's diaper, a child setting the table, an employee working in a factory for his family, a youth who shovels his elderly neighbor's walk, a father who reads to his children. When believers in Christ, who abide in Christ, do any of these things, they're bearing fruit. They bear fruit which helps their neighbor. With Jesus as their source they naturally bloom and bear fruit. They do good works which are pleasing in God's sight. And the only good works which are fragrant, the only good works which have a delicious taste, are those works which spring forth from faith in Jesus, from abiding in the vine.

But because we are his branches who abide in Christ the vine, our Father the vinedresser prunes us. And sometimes his pruning is painful. We're in the vine, we're bearing fruit, and yet we suffer. And this isn't always the effects of the world. God is actually sending it. Why? Well so that he keeps us from just growing wild, to warn us from reverting back to our sinful behavior. When we're growing long and thick and thorny, just living for ourselves, God prunes us back. He shapes each of us like a gardener shapes the branches on a Japanese Bonsai tree. He prunes and disciplines us in a different way according to how he wants each of us to be. His pruning is painful. Ouch! But remember, these are God's clippers. He uses them for our good. His pruning actually makes us a stronger branch. We turn to his word for sustenance. We pray for help. And because we abide in the vine Jesus Christ, our Father hears and answers our pleas for help. The faith which connects us to the vine increases. We abide even more in Jesus.

But his pruning serves another purpose as well. Jesus said, "**Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.**" And so through faith in Jesus we bear even more fruit, not for ourselves but for our neighbor. We live for others. And we tell them about the vine that they may be grafted into Jesus Christ, that they may receive his life giving nourishment through his Word. They taste the delicious fruit and see that the Lord is good. Jesus said, "**By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.**" Our Father is glorified when we abide in Jesus. Our Father is glorified when we bear fruit for our neighbor. And our Father is glorified when other branches are grafted into the true vine, Jesus Christ, and abide in him forever. Amen.

The peace of God which passes all understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.