

**Fifth Sunday of Easter + April 29, 2018**

A few years ago, when I was installed at Phinney, a friend gifted me with a framed quote from Martin Luther. I have it near my desk and read it several times a week. It's Luther's Sacristy Prayer. Let me read a part of it ...

*Lord God, you have appointed me as a Pastor in your church, but you see how unsuited I am to meet so great and difficult a task ... Therefore, I call upon you: I wish to devote my mouth and my heart to you; I shall teach the people. I myself will learn and ponder diligently upon your Word. Use me as your instrument – but do not forsake me, for if ever I should be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.*

Do not forsake me. If I should ever be on my own, I would easily wreck it all.

This prayer is wonderful and I think a prayer like this is appropriate not only for pastors but for all followers of Jesus. A prayer like this would be suitable for all of us. Yes, the work of the Kingdom of God has been entrusted to you, to us, and what would it look like if we were left alone?

We might just easily wreck it all.

The good news is that we are not alone. We are not forsaken. We are connected to Christ. We are dependent on Christ.

Jesus puts it to us this way: “Without me you can do nothing.”  
Without me you can do nothing.

*Abide in me and I in you. I am the Vine, you are the branches. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*

Easter is a time to explore the promises we make at baptism – to commit ourselves to the church and worship, and ministry in daily life – witness, service, striving for justice and peace. And I wonder, if, in that exploration, if the most important word comes from the promise Jesus makes, that he will abide in u and we in him and that without Jesus we can do nothing. That puts all the promises we make in perspective.

We are not forsaken. You are not alone. We are connected as branches to the Vine. Without Jesus we can do nothing.

This good news gives lies to the notion that being spiritual means you live as an independent contractor; that being Christian is a private deal, something you do on your own.

In 2005, a group of sociologists conducted a study of religious attitudes in American and through that study coined a phrase: “Moral Therapeutic Deism (MTD),” According to MTD, there is a god somewhere but such a god is remote and essentially uninvolved in human lives. However uninvolved this god may be, you can still call on this god to help you solve a problem and according to MTD, people ought to be nice, good, and fair. The point of life, though is to be happy and feel good about yourself.

Notice what’s missing from this description:

- the practices of keeping Sabbath
- the practice of weekly worship
- the practice of prayer,
- being connected to a community of faith
- asking God to direct your life
- and leaving open the possibility that God may be discovered in suffering as much as “happiness”

MTD makes sense. It’s the cultural air we breathe. It fits hand and glove with the American dream. It should come as no surprise. What may come to you as a surprise, though, is that suddenly, Jesus’ call to abide sounds really radical and astonishingly countercultural.

This is Jesus’ word to us. Abide in me. Dwell in me. Live in me. Make your home in me. Doing the loving thing, then, isn’t the result of my moral effort of trying to be a “good person.” Love is the fruit we bear because we are connected to Christ.

Who knew that the call to abide is so revolutionary and radical? There are other verbs more active like do and achieve and accomplish and succeed. Abiding, however, has the connotation of putting down roots or staying connected or endurance or sticking close to home. Who knew Jesus’ call to abide would be the radical alternative to a cultural script that is essentially all about “going it alone.”

WE are committed to serving others, seeking justice and peace, and pricing good news in our lives but it isn't the result of being clever or smart or strong. It is the fruit of abiding. Abiding in Christ. Being connected to the Vine. The loving act is less about our decision and more about bearing the fruit of being connected to the vine.

To abide or live in Jesus is to be connected and to be in relationships and it is a call to community. There's no such thing as a single branch. When connected to the vine you get mixed up with other branches.

It's a beautiful thing when we see branches overlaying one another. We support one another, pray for each other, pray with one another, worship together, and we bear one another's burdens. You know these blessings of Christian community. You've experienced them in all kinds of joy and sorrow.

You also know that branches get tangled up with each other. Relationships are complicated and complex. Furthermore, there is the reality of shoots appearing far away from the trunk of the vine and then the branches need pruning. The further away from the trunk, the further from the vine, the less connected we are.

That's what happens when we try to go it alone.

And we do ...

- who needs the vine when I can make god in my own image?
- Who needs the connection if it's all about me anyway?
- Who needs the vine and other branches, if a god exists only to meet my personal need?

Now, this going it alone may not be as simple as forsaking the community. It may also take the form of exerting one's elf into the community quite apart form the vine.

In another parish, some years ago, two distinct ideas emerged around how the congregation should extend love to the wider community. There were wonderful points to be made on both sides. The problem was that there were sides! With that, folks rallied around the passions of each side and suddenly I felt like St. Paul preaching to the Corinthians when he called them out saying that some belong to Apollos, some to Paul, some to Peter. Paul, in exasperation, says, "What about Christ?"

To make a very long story short, finally personal agenda were discarded, folks who butted heads reconciled, another project was conceived and people, no matter how right they may have been, had to give all of that up for the greater good of being in right relationship.

God could do a new thing as the community got closer and closer again to the Vine. A lot of pruning took place before that blessed outcome, but love won out. Thanks be to God.

I remembered this incident because our Vicar asked me to facilitate the discussion of the group talking about *Life Together*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book on Christian community. There Bonhoeffer warns us that "whoever loves their dream of community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter..."

He says God will not permit us to live in a dream world. Love may be the least attractive route but it is the route we pursue as disciples of Jesus.

Today happens to be the Commemoration of Catherine of Sienna, the 14<sup>th</sup> century mystic whose writings reveal her mystic visions. In one vision she praises God for "drunk with love, infatuated your creatures." She praises God for rescuing us with the same love with which you God created us. She makes generous use of the Vine imagery: "You engrafted your divinity into the dead tree of our humanity. O sweet tender engrafting ..."

Before we dismiss Catherine as someone hopelessly lost in the clouds, remember that her feet were planted firmly on the ground. Catherine visited the sick and the prisoner, and in her own right she was a kind of holy trouble maker. She condemned immoral clergy, took on the Pope in public and mediated conflicts among church and state.

Speaking from God's vantage point, in one of her visions she writes: "I have engrafted you onto the vine by making myself one with you ... keep in mind that each of you has your own vineyard ... but everyone is joined to the neighbor's vineyard without any dividing lines."

Now, you don't have to be a mystic to practice this sort of love or know this union with Christ. All you must do is show up. Show up with your sisters and brothers around the Bath, the Word, and the Meal. Soon we will share in the feast of body and blood, bread and wine. We will share the loaf and drink from the same

loving cup. It is intimate even as it is mysterious. We eat and drink together and are connected again to the true Vine and we are overplayed with other branches.

So, come again to taste of the mystery that is Christ, to receive what you are and to be what you received.

Abide in Christ and so bear the fruits of love that you may know and you may let others know that Christ is risen, risen indeed! Amen.