

Many of you know my wife's family grows Christmas trees in Ashe County. There are obviously millions of Christmas trees in this part of the state, but my father-in-law John's trees are easily distinguishable because of two characteristics. One¹: he has the straightest rows of trees you'll ever see. Just look at those! He jokes with people that he's got gps in tractor. But he's been creating straight rows for 30 years now, long before gps existed.

The second way² you can identify farmer John's trees is that they have a slightly wild look about them. He doesn't necessarily trim them tight and into a perfect cone shape. They're a little more natural looking. And that's just a preference. Every farmer trims their trees differently but every farmer trims. And the thing about trimming is, the tighter you trim the trees the more full the trees become. It's counter intuitive – trim more to fill out more – but it makes sense when you consider the branch has buds all along it. By trimming the outer branches, it allows for the buds on the inside of the branch to receive more sunlight, water, and nutrients, which causes the tree to fill out. So the lesson here for today is sometimes in order to grow, you need to trim. In order to grow, you need to trim. And if you do it just right, you just might end up with the perfect Christmas tree³ (picture of me dressed up as a Christmas tree for Halloween).

Final sermon in pathways series on our new graphic ID⁴, visual representation of the vision God has called us to here at Boone UMC.

- Mission: Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ.⁵
- Way we accomplish that mission is through four strategies:⁶
 - o Worship – on Sunday and with all of our lives
 - o Connect – to God and one another
 - o Serve – give back to God who gave all for us
 - o Grow – intentional discipleship, being open to change

Today we focus on Grow.

We're in the beginning of the liturgical season of Lent – preparation for Jesus' journey to the cross. During Lent we'll read the gospel with a processional. We've done this before – in Advent to represent God coming near in Christ. We'll do it again now in Lent to show our solidarity as we walk with Jesus toward the cross.

- Jesus Remember Me – Taize chant, words of the thief on the cross

John 15:1-8⁷

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. **2** He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. **3** You have already been

¹ straight.jpg

² wild.jpg

³ jeff-tree.jpg

⁴ Boone Logo.jpg

⁵ On screen: Loving our community and inviting all to discover life in Christ.

⁶ Boone Strategy.jpg

⁷ On screen please John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. **4** 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.

5 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. **6** Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. **7** If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. **8** My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

The fact that this is an important text is signified in two ways. First, in John's gospel these are some of the last words Jesus speaks to his disciples before heading toward the cross. Secondly, we also know the importance because of repetition.

Abide – repeated 8 times. Apparently Jesus wanted us to get that. Abide – stay or remain, be still, don't be quick to move on. It's either ironic or God's sense of humor that we're talking about abiding, sitting still today. After this week of endless snowdays, the last thing many of us want to do is sit still!

Yet Jesus tells us that abiding is the key to growing as disciples.

- Paradox – Abide so you may grow. Stay so you may always change. Remain so you may not be same. Abide – so you may bear much fruit.
- Counterintuitive – but so is pruning

The key here is obviously what we choose to abide in. Jesus says he is the true vine. Jesus' disciples would have perked up when they heard Jesus make this claim. Israel is referred to as God's vine or vineyard throughout OT (Is 5:1-7, Ps 80:8-16, Hos 10:1). Jeremiah calls Israel "a choice vine, from the purest stock" (Jer 2:21). Israel is God's chosen people, the ones God invested in, cared for, nurtured, etc. Listen to how Isaiah⁸ describes God's people:

-
- **Isaiah 5:1** Let me sing for my beloved [God] my love-song concerning his vineyard: My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill.
- **2** He dug it and cleared it of stones, and planted it with choice vines; he built a watchtower in the midst of it, and hewed out a wine vat in it; he expected it to yield grapes, but it yielded wild grapes.
- **4** What more was there to do for my vineyard that I have not done in it? When I expected it to yield grapes, why did it yield wild grapes?

Israel was God's choice vineyard, God's chosen people, the people God made covenant with to be their God, and they would be God's people. Yet they didn't hold up their end of the bargain. God cleared the land on a very fertile hill, dug out the stones, and planted it with choice vines, the purest stock. And yet Israel produced wild grapes. Not good and abundant fruit.

So when Jesus starts our passage⁹ in John saying, "I am the true vine" that's quite a loaded statement, especially for Jesus' disciples hearing it. First off, the I AM is emphatic in the Greek, and it echoes back to Exodus when God tells Moses, "Tell them I AM sent you" (Ex 3:14). I am the TRUE VINE, Jesus says. Based on what we just read from Isaiah, Jesus' disciples would have heard true vine to mean Israel.

⁸ On screen – Isaiah 5:1-2, 4

⁹ On screen – I am the true vine (John 15:1)

Jesus is one with the IAM, the God of the universe. He's also the TRUE VINE – Israel. Jesus is Israel done right. Jesus fulfills and models the relationship Israel was supposed to have with God. Jesus keeps the covenant with God. He fulfills the law God sent to show Israel how to live as God's people. Jesus shows Israel first, and then all of the rest of the world, how to be in perfect relationship with God. Jesus is the true vine, and he demonstrates how to bear much good fruit. Jesus shows us how to abide in relationship with God. And as he's about to leave his disciples, this is one of his last words to them. Abide. Eight times in as many verses – abide. And you will bear much fruit and be my disciples.

How in the world do we abide? How do we grow in discipleship?

- Intentional
 - o Fullness of discipleship doesn't just happen
 - Xmas trees: Can't just plant trees in ground and 7 years later cut down
 - Intentional care, fertilizing, cutting weeds, trimming to make full
 - o Same w/ discipleship: quiet times, devotionals to nurture soul, SS, community groups
 - See how these strategies build on each other¹⁰
 - WORSHIP, CONNECT, SERVE → GROW
 - Need to make space for them in order to grow
- Hard to do with full schedules
 - o Meetings, kids and their activities, church functions, volunteer activities
 - o But just like with Christmas trees, in order to grow, you might need to trim
 - And some of the things you trim might be good things
 - But if they're not producing fruit in your life, if the way your life is now isn't producing fullness in discipleship, if you're not growing, maybe it's time to prune to allow space to abide more fully.

Recently the church staff spent time with Peter Scazzero, author of a series of books on Emotionally Healthy Spirituality. He talked with us about the importance of keeping the Sabbath, and much of what he said applies directly to abiding in Christ.

Sabbath (Abide) from Peter Scazzero¹¹ - 24 hrs [Emotionally Healthy Spirituality]

1. Stop – find a way to get out of the rat race for a bit, unplug
2. Rest – do no work – turn off phone, computers, don't do chores or run errands, actually rest.
3. Delight – do something that brings delight – movie, music, read, eat, exercise, play with kids
4. Contemplate – reflect where you've seen God

- pray
- read scripture slowly (v7 my words abide in you)

Don't get legalistic about this though. Just do what you can. That's all we can do anyway.

Abiding – not just one particular thing. Not just “have your quiet time with God.” It doesn't have to be the same thing you've always done. That's why I like the language of delight. It reminds us that God is everywhere and can be found anywhere. Ps 139 Where can I go from your spirit? Flee from your presence? Heaven, depths, far side of sea? Even there you will find me.

- Don't limit yourself thinking abiding has to be this one thing, beating yourself up for not abiding correctly or in the right way

¹⁰ Boone Strategy.jpg

¹¹ On screen: Sabbath (Abide) - stop, rest, delight, reflect

- Have you seen healthy vines growing?¹² Beautiful, interconnected, wandering, tangled mess.
 - o Just like life. Just like discipleship.

Wendell Berry is one of my favorite authors, and he gets at this idea of God abiding with us always and everywhere, sometimes even when we can't see God.

Wendell Berry from *Jaber Crow*

"If you could do it, I suppose, it would be a good idea to live your life in a straight line - starting, say, in the Dark Wood of Error, and proceeding by logical steps through Hell and Purgatory and into Heaven. Or you could take the King's Highway past the appropriately named dangers, toils, and snares, and finally cross the River of Death and enter the Celestial City. But that is not the way I have done it, so far. I am a pilgrim, but my pilgrimage has been wandering and unmarked. Often what has looked like a straight line to me has been a circling or a doubling back. I have been in the Dark Wood of Error any number of times. I have known something of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, but not always in that order. The names of many snares and dangers have been made known to me, but I have seen them only in looking back. Often I have not known where I was going until I was already there. I have had my share of desires and goals, but my life has come to me or I have gone to it mainly by way of mistakes and surprises. Often I have received better than I deserved. Often my fairest hopes have rested on bad mistakes. I am an ignorant pilgrim, crossing a dark valley. And yet for a long time, looking back, I have been unable to shake off the feeling that I have been led - make of that what you will."

Abide. Wherever you are, look around and find God. Even if you feel disconnected, wandering or lost. You can't go anywhere God is not. But in order to see God's hand on our lives, we need to set aside time to look for it. We need to abide. Only then can we perceive God walking with us, leading us. And God uses seasons of plenty as well as seasons of discontent to help form and shape us. To help us grow. To help us bear fruit for God's kingdom.

[CR: Invite worship team up]

And that leads us to a final question¹³: Where is God pruning you right now? [REPEAT]

- One thing our passage promises is that we will be pruned, whether we're growing or not
 - o If not: cut off and discarded
 - o If bearing fruit: pruned to bear even more fruit
- If you're in a season of pain, darkness, doubt, is it possible that you're experiencing growing pains? Might God be inviting you to prune?
- If you're in season of tremendous personal and spiritual growth, where might you need pruning in order to grow more?
-
- Where might God be calling you to do less in order that you might bear more fruit?

Season of Lent is a good time for pruning. It's a good time to set aside distractions and focus more intently on Christ, journeying with him to the cross. In this next 40 days, what are the things that you need to disconnect from? Prune? Cut off, in order that you might bear more fruit? That you might abide more richly?

¹² vine.jpg

¹³ On screen: Where is God pruning you right now?

Check out the Watauga Democrat today for Pastor Jason's article about Lent. He suggests that if we don't like the idea of giving something up, try putting something on instead.

- Abide in things that allow stronger connection to the true vine, the source of all life
 - Gratitude, prayer – abide in those. Delight in those.

Beginning of Lent is marked by Ash Wed (this year it will be Sunday, thanks to the weather)

- In a moment we'll invite you to receive ashes on your forehead in shape of cross
 - from ashes of Palm branches and prayer cards from sanctuary
 - Visibly identifies us as Christians, shows unity with Christians throughout world
 - Lent invites us to enter into story – pray with Jesus, suffer, carry our crosses too
 - reminds us we are sinners who need to repent, sinners saved by God's grace
 - **reminds us that we are nothing but a pile of dust**
 - Gen 3:18 Remember you are dust, and to dust you shall return
- Jesus says it this way in our text: Apart from me, you can do nothing. (John 15:5)
 - But abide in me, and you'll glorify God by producing good fruit for God's kingdom.
- May we abide in Christ. Now and forevermore. Amen.