

Abiding

John 15:1-8

May 2, 2021

First Presbyterian, Luling

We have a flowerbed in the back corner of our yard. It's the spot in the yard that gets the most sun, so I wanted to plant some tomatoes there, and hopefully my little baby okra seedlings, if they didn't drown yesterday. There were some bulbs in there—spider lilies of some sort—that needed thinning out anyway, so I dug some of them up and gave them away to some neighbors. And in the process, I pulled up—or tried to pull up--the things that weren't supposed to be growing in that flower bed. The most prominent of those is a morning glory vine. It really really likes that spot, and is all intertwined with the bulbs. While I was digging up the bulbs, I unearthed a main part of the morning glory root. I started pulling, and it kept coming and coming and coming. By the time it finally broke off, it was 12 feet long, all the length of the flowerbed. I felt victorious. Finally, I would be getting rid of that morning glory vine once and for all.

But no. It's back. Coming up all over the flowerbed. Even popping up in the grass. Climbing the tomato cages and even the plants themselves if I don't clear them every single day. It is tenacious.

I'm pretty sure Jesus wasn't talking about a morning glory vine when he said "I am the vine, you are the branches." I'm pretty sure the imagery he had in mind were grapevines. Grapevines were an ordinary plant to the disciples, and to compare people to grapevines was a common metaphor in the scriptures of Jesus and the disciples. We do have some vineyards nearby us, scattered around, but they aren't a part of our everyday life the way they were for the disciples. I think my pesky morning glory vine has a few things to teach us, even if it's not a grapevine.

"I am the vine, you are the branches." That you is plural, by the way, as are all the yous in these verses. Jesus is the vine, and we together are the branches. God the Father is the vinegrower, the one ultimately responsible for tending the vines and keeping them productive. Unlike the morning glory, grapevines need tending and pruning in order to flourish and produce fruit. So, thankfully, God is in charge of the vine, its growth, and production.

What are humans supposed to do, as branches of the vine? There are only two verbs in the passage that are commands, and the primary one is "abide."

“Abide” appears nine times in these 8 verses, not to mention six more times in the reading from First John that Beth read.

You know the verse that we frequently read at funerals, “in my Father’s house are many mansions”? That “mansions” word sometimes gets translated “dwelling places,” but it’s from the same root as “abide.” So, “in my Father’s house are many abiding places.” Where we abide is where we are deeply at home, where we are intended to be in the most ultimate sense. It’s a different metaphor with the same meaning and the same verb. Our abiding place is in the vine, in Jesus, where we are most deeply and enduringly at home.

We are supposed to abide, remain, stay. Abide in Jesus, as Jesus already abides in us. And when we abide in the vine, then we are fruitful. Putting the two readings together, as well as if we kept reading a few more verses in the Gospel of John, we can determine pretty clearly that love is the key to abiding. In order to choose to abide in the vine, we must choose to love. And the fruit that we in turn bear on our branches is also love. And of course, Jesus’s love for us flows through the vine into the branches nourishes us. Love comes into us through the vine, flows through us, and flows out into the world as fruit. And love itself enables us to abide. Apart from me you can do nothing, Jesus says in verse 5. Apart from love we can do nothing. Love is the key to abiding. Love is the key for bearing fruit. Love is the key to the whole vineyard operation.

Back to the morning glory vine. That thing, as I described, is tenacious. It isn’t going anywhere, apparently. No matter how much I’ve pulled it up, snapped it off, or otherwise tried to get rid of it, it remains in that flowerbed. It abides, you might say. Branches of it come, and branches of it go. It gets frozen in a freak ice and snow storm a couple months ago. It gets hit by drought and floods. Still it thrives. It abides.

Since we are branches abiding in the strongest vine there is, the vine that can survive death itself, then the love that flows through that vine into us as the branches is stronger than we’ve even imagined.

This passage sometimes gets interpreted as if each branch is an independent entity, not affecting the other branches on the vine. But remember all of those plural “you”s I mentioned? The branches of a vine bring in nutrients and strengthen the vine itself, which in turn allows it to strengthen and grow other branches. Each branch’s abiding in the vine strengthens each other branch. So if we translate that back, my abiding can make you stronger, and your abiding can make me stronger. Yet another way to understand how we love one another, and love the Lord our God, and love our neighbor.