

Abide in Me

Psalm 1:1-3; John 15:1-11

May 15, 2022 – Center Harbor Congregational Church, UCC

Rev. Dr. Cathryn Turrentine

Do you remember the first time I stood in this pulpit to preach? It was February 2017. I began: I love dirt.... I mean the dirt of a fresh garden. I love the wonderful, yeasty smell of warm dirt when it is ready to be planted. I love the feel of it when I plunge my bare hands down into the soil to hide the seed. I love its rich, dark, coffee color. I love the possibilities of life and growth. I. Love. Dirt.

Do you remember? I still love my garden, but now five years later, a few things are different. I wear gardening gloves, for one thing. And my back doesn't like the work of gardening these days, all the bending and pulling, so I concentrate on perennials now, and shrubs.

Which leads me this morning to the task of pruning. That I am not so good at. I don't really understand the theory. So, I have always followed the Old Testament approach – if thy right branch offend thee, cut it off. If it doesn't look right to me, I am there with my loppers.

But there is a timing to pruning that I have never understood, and I fear that I have set back some of my hydrangeas rather than helping them along. One year I cut them back severely in the fall. They glowered at me all the next spring.

Then a week or so ago, on WMUR, I saw a piece about pruning hydrangeas, and I was glued to my TV set. At last, I would learn the secret. It turns out that there are several different types of hydrangeas, and when you prune them depends on which type you have. If you have peegee hydrangeas, the kind that are white and pink with a sort of conical bloom, you prune them in the fall. But if you have the big blue bulb hydrangeas like mine, you wait until the spring, and you keep waiting until the bush starts to green up. Only then do you take out the branches that didn't come back from the previous year.

This is probably really old news to all of you, but it was big news to me. I'm so glad I didn't prune my hydrangeas at all last fall! This pruning thing takes some skill I have not had before, and it takes patience. Not my best virtue.

~*~

Our scripture from the Gospel of John is about God the Gardener, the vinegrower, Jesus the vine, and we the branches. God lovingly cares for us, pruning away everything that is unhealthy, all that saps us of our creativity, so that we blossom and bear good fruit. In this passage, Jesus is speaking to his disciples shortly before the Crucifixion. This is part of his Farewell Discourses, as Jesus is facing the cross, and he urgently tells his disciples what he most needs them to know, since he will not be with them much longer.

This is his farewell message to them: "I am the vine," he says. "You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.... As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love."

Think about how different this final instruction is from what we see in the Gospel of Matthew. **There**, Jesus' final instruction to his disciples is active: "Go forth and make disciples of all nations." But **here** in the Gospel of John, it's "Abide in me and bear fruit." Vines don't GO anywhere, let alone to all nations. Like the tree that is planted by the water in the psalm we just read, they will not be moved.

They stay where they are planted, and Jesus says, his disciples are planted in his love. They will not be moved.

Here Jesus says Stay. Abide in me. That is, remain in me, dwell in me, stay with me, and I will remain in you, even though I will no longer be physically present with you.

Urgently, Jesus is saying to his friends, don't go wandering away from what we have been to each other. Just live in my love. If you do that, you will naturally bear fruit.

That is a comforting image, isn't it? Jesus is the true vine. We are the branches that grow out of him. Everything we need to bear fruit is already in us, naturally. God has already given us everything we need to become the people we are called to be.

Even if we feel like we are a long way from that goal, this scripture tells us that if we remain rooted in God's love, if we stay with what we have learned from our relationship with Jesus, then we already have the seeds in us for the life to which God calls us. So just sit in that love. Rest in it. Let it fill your heart, and you will blossom and bear fruit.

~~~

I have to tell you that this call to "abide," beautiful as it is, is a little challenging for me. I am more comfortable with a To Do list. Give me something specific to accomplish, and I have a direction, a goal. Patience is not an easy virtue for me to practice.

But this scripture says no. Be still. Wait. Wait for a season. Trust that you already have within you everything you need to bloom and bear fruit one day. Let God prune away all the parts of you that are not fruitful. Wait for God to call you naturally to a moment of blossoming.

If our central task in life is to abide in God's love and wait for the right time to bloom, here is where I have to ask the hard question: where are you in this cycle of growth and maturation and bearing fruit? Do you feel like you are living the whole and holy life to which God calls you at this stage of your life? Maybe you are already blossoming. Maybe God has already done all the tending and pruning and coaxing so that your own vine is ready to set fruit.

But maybe this is a time of waiting for you, maybe waiting impatiently, for God to call forth your best gifts. I've had times in my life like that. Are you spinning your wheels, not getting anywhere, feeling anxious and lacking in direction for this part of your life? When you hear God whispering in your ear, do you perhaps wonder if you have what it takes to respond?

No matter where we are in that cycle of growth, our charge is the same: abide in Jesus, feel him filling us with the love of God. Trust that God has already endowed us with all the gifts we need, and God is nourishing us as surely as God uses soil and rain to nourish the vine.

My hydrangeas will be fine this year, because I waited a season to prune them. And also, because they are nourished by God's good earth and by the rain and the sunshine that God sends. They don't have to go anywhere or accomplish anything. Their blooms come naturally because that beauty is built into the branches from which they sprang. The beauty of your soul is built into you as well.

Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, and we are filled with the love of God, all day, every day of our lives. Remain in that love. Live in that love. Abide in God's love. Amen