

“Abide in My Love”
Sermon by Oby Ballinger
Ash Wednesday
Edina Morningside Community Church; February 14, 2018

John 15:1-17

[Jesus says,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. You are my friends if you do what I command you. I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

Javen and I have made a couple mistakes with our little rosebud tree. A few years ago, we decided to replant the gardens around our house, and our biggest investment was a dwarf rosebud tree next to the front entrance. It’s not supposed to get more than 8 feet tall, with fluttering heart-shaped leaves and sweet little pink buds that come out early in the spring. But in the last several years, we realize we still planted it too close to the house foundation. It’s not able to thrive if the roots are cramped against the concrete, not given room to grow. Also, the tree had misshapen leaves throughout the entire last season. We recently got the results of a test back, and it appears that mites had infested the tree. These little mites are smaller to see than aphids, but they had sucked out all the sap leading to the leaves, leaving the leaves cupped and unable to bend open or soak up the light. Our sweet tree is a pitiful shadow of what it could be, judging from the advertised pictures when we bought it.

But all is not lost. We recently had a landscape architect over to the house, and she told us what we’d be able to do. “Come spring,” she tells us, “transplant it out further from the house. When you do, trim back the part of the roots that were against the house, so they grow back more vigorously and fill in the root ball. Put stakes up to hold it in place so it stays upright. Water carefully and regularly after transplanting, and it will soon put out new roots from which to grow into a robust, healthy tree.” We’re grateful for the wisdom of this landscape architect! Without her, we’d likely have uprooted the tree and thrown it away. It makes a difference, learning from someone who’s experienced in the care of plants.

The same goes for the One who cares for souls. Jesus uses agricultural imagery here too, but make no mistake that he’s talking about people. Our passage in John 15 comes during the “farewell discourse” of Jesus. Judas has already left the disciples upstairs, and Jesus teaches those who remain what they will need after he’s gone. He calls them to “abide in me as I abide in you”, as a vine and its branches are connected for good. The word “abide” here is “meno” in the Greek. It’s a fertile word in John’s gospel, with associations like “stay”, “remain”, and “take root”. To “abide” with Jesus is to stay connected, no matter

what. Imagine the sap of a tree or a vine, all unified through roots, trunk, branches, stems and leaves by the sap. Now imagine one part of the tree—the trunk—girdled with a knife, stripped of its bark so that the unbroken link of sap was broken. You know what happens next—the tree quickly dies. Energy from leaves cannot reach the root, and water cannot rise up to the leaves. The same happens with people, Jesus says, when they fail to abide in him. Human beings keep spiritually alive as we stay refreshed in Christ.

The sap of this vine that unites all the parts, Jesus says, is his love. That is what holds together the vine with its branches. Abiding in this love takes on character and form according to the commandments of Jesus, particularly one. “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.”

Could there be a better message for Ash Wednesday, or a better way to extend the depth and meaning of Valentine’s Day? This is not chalky candy hearts, with their shallow, generic platitudes. This is the self-giving, other-directed, personal and joyful love shown by the best kind of mother, father, church member, friend or partner. Love one another as Jesus loves us—as Jesus pours himself into the world, and God into him, all of us bound together by this mutually-enhancing, ineffable, undying love. Yes, please! Where do we sign up for *that*??

If all of Epiphany was an invitation to “Come and See” what this Jesus is up to, now we will marvel at the extent of this love, all other loves excelling. No greater love than that of Jesus, which shelters and gives hope to those who are lost. No greater love than to meet shame and judgment with mercy and forgiveness. No greater love than to nurture in body and spirit those who hunger and thirst. No greater love than to pour out extravagant blessings that leave one speechless. No greater love than to unbind the dead and let them go free. No greater love than to show up where you’re doomed, still announcing liberation. No greater love than to lay down one’s life for one’s friends. This is what it means to abide in his love, to be suffused in the sap and life of this vine. We will be called back again and again to his life and his love, taking on the awesome invitation to love one another in the same ways.

This is all done not for its own sake, not just to keep the vine and branches satisfied with themselves. No, Christ has something greater in mind. The purpose of that vine, the calling of every branch, the goal of the entire whole, is to “go and bear fruit, fruit that will last.” That’s the point of vines after all, isn’t it—to yield juicy, luscious, abundant fruit? We remain in Christ, Christ in God, and Christ in us, all so that we will continue to bear the fruits of his undying life into the world.

It begins here though, begins with this night of ash and dust. Here we recognize our mortality, limitations, and failings. We consider those parts in ourselves which may keep us from bearing the best fruit. We open ourselves to the spiritual pruning that might be required, letting ourselves be reshaped, remade, and reconnected to the vine. It begins here, at the communion table—with these symbols of good growth, and rich fruit. These are reminders of the continuous spirit flowing in and through the whole. Being steeped in love—the Love that knows nothing greater—begins here tonight, and continues throughout Lent.

Javen and I now have a plan for that rosebud tree by our front door. As soon as the frost ends, we’ll dig around it carefully and pull it from where it’s been mis-planted. We’ll tend its roots and plant it carefully in its new hole, as we’ve been told. And over the days and weeks that follow, we’ll do as we’ve been advised: watch regularly to make sure it’s growing well, spend a little time with it each day, turning the leaves over and looking underneath, treating for mites if they come back. With patient, steady care, that tree will blossom again, and better grow into the fullness that is possible for one of God’s creations.

Lent is our invitation to do the same in our spiritual lives, having “no greater love” than abiding with God in Jesus Christ. Let us do what’s needed throughout the days and weeks ahead to abide in the vine which is our source and our life, Love itself. Beginning tonight. Amen.