

Date: May 14, 2006

SUNDAY: Easter 5

SERMON: Abiding in Love

Text(s): 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

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Since spring came early to Maine this year, the gardening duties have already begun. Many people have already done their spring cleanup and have begun digging in the dirt, planting and mulching and pruning. As my wife is fond of telling people, I'm all for the planting part; it's the weeding that comes afterward that I'm not so keen on.

Part of the annual rituals of gardening involves pruning certain shrubs or trees. And this is where Carol and I have some different ideas about how things should be done. When she sees me with the pruning shears in her hands, she gets nervous. To be fair, her anxieties stem back to our days in Malaysia. Our parsonage there came complete with a gardener, a middle-aged Malay man named Tutong, who had taken care of the property there for many years. Cutting the grass was an almost daily necessity in a climate where the average daytime temperature is 95 and where the average rainfall is about 180 inches a year. Having a paid gardener wasn't a luxury, but a necessity; otherwise keeping up the garden would have been a full-time job in itself, and the Board of Global Ministries hadn't sent us there to cut grass and prune the shrubs.

During our early months there, we spoke only a few words of Malay, and Tutong spoke about the same number of English words. So we communicated mostly by gestures.

One day, I noticed that the row of colorful croton bushes that lined our driveway were in need of pruning. They were getting too large and bushy, so with a few words and many gestures, I managed to convey the message to Tutong that I wanted him to prune the crotons. Later, when I got home, I discovered that Tutong was a subscriber to what Carol and I have come to refer to as "the barbershop school" of pruning. Rather

than judiciously pruning off some of the larger branches and thinning out the bush while maintaining its shape, Tutong had simply given all the crotons a drastic haircut, and a flattop at that! They were just as bushy as ever, but they were about two feet shorter. We discovered, however, that in the tropics, it really didn't matter. The crotons grew back so quickly that in a matter of weeks, they were getting out of hand again.

Our gospel lesson today uses the image of a vineyard owner pruning grapevines to describe the relationship of the Christian to Christ. It's such a simple, yet rich and complex analogy.

John's comparison of our relationship to Jesus to that of the relationship between a grapevine and its branches contains a promise. *"The one who abides in me and I in him will bear much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing...every branch that bears fruit, the Father prunes that it may bear more fruit."* Pruning, as John makes clear, and as all of us who are gardeners know, is not a punishment, but a program of training. We send our children to piano or violin lessons or to baseball practice because we want them to acquire the skills in those areas that can only come through regular, systematic training. And as we all remember, training programs are not always fun all the time. Sometimes the training is difficult, frustrating, or boring, but we accept that because, at the end of the day, we want to be able to make beautiful music or catch grounders well enough to make a double play. We prune fruit trees or grape vines in order to train them and free them for the purpose for which they exist, fruit production. So if we are called into relationship with Christ as a disciple, it is so that we can produce some "fruit," as John says, and that fruit, as the context makes clear, is the fruit of love.

Not only the immediate context in our gospel lesson, but the larger context of John's thought emphasizes that learning how to love is the goal, not only of the Christian life, but of all human life. Our epistle lesson, which comes from the same spiritual circles, if not necessarily

from the same author as the Gospel of John, also drives home the point. No fewer than fifteen times in the few verses that were read for us this morning, the word love appears. And the passage is summed up by this statement, *“If we love one another, God abides in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.”*

So whatever else the Christian life is about, it is about being made perfect in love. It is about the love of God working itself out through our lives so that in our love for others, the love of God becomes visible and concrete. God’s love can only be experienced in our love for one another.

The discovery that the goal of the Christian life is to produce the fruit of love is the discovery of every great saint down through the centuries. St. John of the Cross, in 15th century Spain, wrote eloquently and poetically of “the living flame of love,” as that which an experience of God kindles in our hearts.

Lady Julian of Norwich, the fourteenth century English saint, barely survived a severe and prolonged illness as a young woman. During her sickness, she had some mystical visions, perhaps produced by her illness or perhaps not. Many years later, after a lifetime of reflection on them, she described them in what has become one of the great classics of the spiritual life. At the conclusion of her book, she asks the question why God allowed her to experience both the severe pruning that her illness represented, as well as the mystical visions which accompanied it. Her answer:

You would know our Lord’s meaning in this thing? Know it well. Love was his meaning. Who showed it you? Love. What did he show you? Love. Why did he show it? For love. Hold on to this and you will know and understand love more and more. But you will not know or learn anything else, ever.

Lady Julian and St. John of the Cross had it right. They knew that the love of God, made

incarnate in Jesus Christ and transmitted to his disciples as the life is transmitted from a vine to its branches is the end and goal of God’s intentions for human life. To be fully human is to be fully loving. To the extent that we are not yet fully mature in our ability to love, we are, to that extent, not in full possession of our humanity.

What does it mean, then, to “abide in Christ?” How do we remain connected to Christ, so that our lives begin to produce this fruit of love? John gives us a clue. In our gospel reading, Jesus says, *“If my words abide in you...”* We live in an age that is saturated by words. Words bombard us everywhere we turn. In the ages before the invention of moveable type, words were not nearly as prevalent and therefore were accorded much more significance. A person, in fact, was indistinguishable from his words.

But with the invention of writing, and more importantly the printing press, and now even more so with electronic media like television and word processors and video, words are everywhere. Through the technology of video, we can watch and hear President John F. Kennedy dead for years, standing at the Berlin Wall saying, “Ich bin ein Berliner” (The Berliners readily forgave him for his grammatical error that made his statement really say, “I am a jelly donut.”), or Martin Luther King, also long gone still giving his “I have a dream” speech that lit the fire of the civil rights revolution. We can go to libraries and look up what ancient scholars have written on any subject. We can turn on our radios and TV’s at any hour of the day or night and somebody will be speaking, telling us what’s happening all around the world or trying to sell us a product or making us laugh or stirring our emotions with dramatic acting. We live in the era where, as we say, “Talk is cheap.”

And just because words are so omnipresent, it is very hard for us to single out the words which we really need to hear and

which really are significant for our lives. It was this cheapening of words, this mass-marketing of words that caused Gandhi to adopt the habit of fasting from speech one day a week. Gandhi wanted his words to mean something when he did speak, so he kept silence to allow significant words to grow within him.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who died in 1968, spoke eloquently to the difficulty we have in our modern world hearing the word of Christ.

The world we live in is dry ground for the seed of God's truth. A modern city is not altogether a propitious place in which to try to love God. You cannot love God unless you know God. And you cannot know God unless you have a little time and a little peace in which to pray and think about Him and study his truth. Time and peace are not easily come by in this civilization of ours. And so those who profess to serve God are often forced to get along without either, and to sacrifice their hopes of an interior life. But how far can one go in this sacrifice before it ceases to be a sacrifice and becomes a prevarication? The truth is, we are simply not permitted to devote ourselves to God without at the same time leading an interior life. . . This [must be gained] by a constant discipline of recollection, meditation, prayer, study, mortification of the desires, and at least some measure of solitude and retirement.

Abiding in Christ, then, means listening to Christ, and this can only be done, as Merton says, by living an interior life where we learn to tune out the multitudes of unimportant words in order to give attention to the life-giving words of Christ.

I'm always intrigued that so many modern Americans, including many who have been raised in the church, seem to think that they have to turn to the religions of the East, particularly Buddhism, in order to discover a more contemplative, meditative way of living,

when in reality, if they were more aware of their own religious tradition, they would discover that there is every bit as rich an emphasis on the contemplative interior life as there is in any of the Eastern traditions. St. John of the Cross, Lady Julian of Norwich, and Thomas Merton are only three of the thousands of the master gardeners of the soul who can help us learn how to accept the pruning that makes us fruitful disciples of Christ.

Maintaining a regular training program of solitude, prayer, and recollection is the pruning that we need in order to be productive, fruitful disciples of Jesus. Only by stilling the noises and incessant clamor of the world can we hear the quiet, life-giving words of Christ. This is one of the hardest things for any of us to do in today's world, isn't it. Our schedule of activities are so frantic, the demands of work and family life so pressing, that we feel guilty if we set aside any time for cultivating our interior life. It seems like a luxury rather than a necessity. It seems so self-indulgent. And yet, when we don't do it, our fruitfulness dries up. We're like an unpruned vine— all foliage and little fruit. Martin Luther once wrote that he had so much to do, and so many demands on him, and so many duties to perform that he felt he had to give himself an extra hour of prayer or he'd never get everything done that he had to do. Hardly the response that we make when we feel ourselves similarly overburdened and overwrought, is it?

But if we would give ourselves permission to take the time to do this listening, to be pruned by the words of Christ, our lives could and would be very different. We would begin to bear the fruits of love. Our relationships to our families, to our colleagues, our friends, even our enemies, would take on a transformed hue.

All around us, every day, people are dying for want of real love. An older person living out her remaining years alone starves for the company of someone to talk to, to listen to her memories, to acknowledge her fears. A single parent, overwhelmed with trying to rear a child

and work at the same time, cries out for someone to acknowledge her struggle. A colleague at the office is going through a painful divorce, and has withdrawn into a private hell of guilt and anger. Young adults, and even teenagers, look for love in casual sexual encounters they call “hooking up.” We meet these people every day, and too often we don’t even think about them as people who have the same needs we do. We relate to them professionally or impersonally, dealing with them at the functional level, but not in the context of those who may never experience the love of God except as they experience it in our loving actions and words. *“This is my commandment, said Jesus, that you love one another as I have loved you.”*

Whatever else it means to abide in love, to abide in the vine, it means that the fruits of such abiding are profoundly social. It is in our relationships that the fruits of love will be manifested. To abide in Christ is never a private, personal, interior spiritual experience. It is a call to community. Love is relational. Loving God is synonymous with loving our neighbor; it is not possible to love the one without loving the other. God does not love us abstractly, and it is not possible for us to love God or our neighbors in the abstract. God’s love for us took on flesh and blood in Jesus Christ, who lived among us, hungered and thirsted as we do, suffered both from us and for us, and shared even our mortality, dying the very same death that all of us die. Real love, God’s love is costly. Our love cannot be less concrete or less incarnate or less costly than God’s.

Which brings us back to the necessity of the pruning shears and to our willingness to place ourselves in the hands of the Master Gardener, to allow all that is unloving or selfish to be trimmed away, so that we begin to produce the pure fruits of love in a world where it is too often absent but desperately needed and fervently desired.