

April 29, 2018: Fifth Sunday of Easter (Year B)
John 15:1-8: Abide

Last Sunday's service was a good one. Several of you have made comments to that effect. I even heard a few "amens." Any time we gather for worship is a good time, but there are some services where the presence of the Holy Spirit is more evident. If a service is good, the glory goes to God. We can't take the credit. I know I can't. I wrote the bulk of the sermon while riding on a bus full of 5th graders as we traveled to Washington D.C. and back. I wondered if I should try to re-create that environment, so I put the finishing touches on this sermon while waiting for my daughter to attend a birthday party at the skating rink. If I mention any 80's hits or the Hokie Pokie this morning...you know why.

We can't conjure up the Holy Spirit, or somehow manipulate him, though some people certainly try. But we can certainly quench the Holy Spirit. Last Sunday we celebrated what it means to say "The Lord is my Shepherd," which is just such an amazing thing to think about. But I've wondered if we would have been receptive to the Holy Spirit if we spent more time thinking about what that says about us. In that metaphor, we are sheep. If you know a thing or two about sheep, you know that's not a very complimentary comparison. Not the most intelligent animals. This Sunday it's worse. We are being compared to branches, twigs, sticks, a piece of wood. Suddenly calling your spouse a blockhead sounds like a very spiritual thing to do.

Of course, we are being referred to as branches because Jesus is being referred to as the vine. This is partly to set up Jesus' lesson here that we are to bear fruit. If we don't bear fruit, Jesus says, we will be cut off and thrown in the fire. You could interpret that as a word of warning, but you could also recognize it as a statement of fact. From the point of view of the vine grower, a branch that does not bear fruit takes vital nutrients from the branches that do bear fruit. If the nutrient we need to bear fruit is grace, we could infer from this that Jesus is saying God's grace will not be wasted. If you have received God's grace, but are not allowing it to produce its intended result, you are somehow harming the rest of the vine. And this can only go on for so long.

What is the fruit that we must bear? Next Sunday we will continue this passage and Jesus will emphasize the the fruit of love for one another. But there is other fruit of the Spirit. Paul also mentions joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness and self-control. These are the things that should be growing in our lives if we followers of Jesus. But like a branch on a vine, we cannot bear fruit unless we abide in Jesus. If we look closely at this word we realize that we are not any ordinary branch. There is something different about us.

Most of you know that I took a break from full-time ministry not too long ago and had a job as a secondary social studies teacher. In order to do this, I had to go back to school and get my teaching degree and license. Like any degree there were certain requirements I had to fulfill, including taking three elective classes. I chose to take graduate level history courses. And it was kind of intimidating.

I felt like I had something to prove. Most of my fellow students were younger than me, or working toward their PhD. They acted like my seminary degree was something I found in a specially marked box of cereal. And like any academic discipline, there were certain words they used that were unique to that discipline, words I didn't understand. I knew the quicker I learned them, the better.

One of those words was the word agency. They used it all the time. That is a word we have all heard before and use often, usually to refer to a business or an organization. But that is not the way they used

it. The used it in more of a philosophical sense, to refer to the capacity of an actor to act in a particular environment. Let me explain:

History is generally written from the point of view of the people in charge. In the recording of history, certain people groups have been portrayed passively, generally as victims, with no ability to influence their own circumstances. It is almost as if they are just along for the ride, and other people are making all their decisions for them.

Women are often portrayed this way, as are minority groups, such as the poor. In our country specifically that would include groups like slaves, and Native Americans. For many historians, the goal is to search through old documents and other artifacts and prove that members of these people groups did in fact have agency. That in spite of their circumstances, they had some say or influence in the unfolding of their lives.

Learning this word helped a lot. My professor would call on me to answer a question, and I would start in. The professor, and my classmates, would be staring at me with these blank expressions, or worse...then I would throw in that word, and suddenly my answer made sense.

Agency is a not a word we use a whole lot to talk about our salvation. That makes sense, because agency would describe the role an individual plays in their salvation, their responsibility, so to speak, so it doesn't come up a lot. This is because we are saved by grace, which is something God does. From the moment we believe in Jesus, really even before the moment we believe, to the moment we meet Jesus face to face, and even for all eternity, we are completely and utterly dependent on God's amazing grace. That is what the Bible teaches.

But is it the only thing the Bible says about salvation? Does the Bible tell the story of salvation in such a way that those who are saved have no agency whatsoever? That those who are saved are merely passive recipients of God's grace, with no say, or influence, or personal responsibility in the matter?

That seemed to be the message last week, with the way the psalmist described God as a Shepherd who follows us, pursues us, chases after us, until the way we die. Not a whole lot of choice there. And as I mentioned earlier, he compared us to sheep. You wouldn't look at a sheep and say, "now there is an animal in charge of its own destiny." Sheep are fairly passive animals. They are not particularly ambitious or interested in making their own way in the world.

And now in the passage we just read this morning, Jesus compares us to the branches on a vine and says we must abide in him, who is the vine, if we are to bear fruit. But branches have no agency at all. Or do they? The word "abide" is an imperative, which means it is a command. What sense would it make to issue a command to someone or something that has no say one way or the other? We do have a say. As branches, we have agency. We do have a role to play in the story of our salvation. We must choose to abide in Jesus.

What exactly does it mean to abide in Jesus? Abiding in Jesus is about experiencing an intimate relationship with him, a closeness that is almost indescribable. It's one of those things that you cannot fully describe, but you know it when you see it. There are people we know, or have known, who we would describe the same way the author of Genesis described Enoch, when he said "he walked with God." More than know about God, they know God. We see it in the way they carry themselves, in the way they love and care about others, in their devotion to the things of God, and of course, in the fruit they bear.

This is the kind of relationship we should aspire to have with Jesus. It won't happen overnight, and it won't happen without some effort on our part. Just as having a worthwhile relationship with our spouse, or our children, or our closest friends requires us to do things, like communicate with them, and spend time with them, so does having a worthwhile relationship with Jesus. We must spend time in his Word, and in prayer, and in fellowship with other believers. Nobody is making us to do those things. Those are all decisions we make, or don't make. Every day we decide whether or not we will abide in Jesus.

This idea that we have a role to play in our salvation is not in contradiction with the earlier idea I mentioned, that we are saved by grace. It is complimentary. It's part of the full picture of salvation presented to us in the Bible. God has poured out his grace upon us so that we might experience his salvation. His grace enables a response. How we respond is our decision. What is your decision? Are you doing your best to abide, to remain in him?

If you consider yourself to be a follower of Jesus, this question is not intended to inspire fear, but more self-examination. Fear should not enter into the equation because the vine grower wants us to succeed. He sent his Son to die for us, and invited us into a relationship with him, because he wants us to bear fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that will glorify Him and lead others into the kingdom. Jesus did not come into the world to condemn the world, but so that the world might be saved through him.

For further evidence, think back again to last week and the picture of God painted by the 23rd Psalm. The picture of a Good Shepherd who leads us, who walks beside us, and behind us, stopping at nothing in order to bring us safely into the fold.

Whether or not we will abide in Jesus is not pre-determined, but his abiding in us is not in question...it never has been...it never will be.

In a few moments, after our time of prayer, we are going to sing our hymn of response, Abide with Me. It is one of the most well-known hymns of all time, appearing in nearly every Hymnal in the English language. As we sing you may say, "I've never heard it." It's about time you learned it.

The hymn was written by an award winning poet, Henry Francis Lyte, in the early to middle 1800's. There is some disagreement whether he wrote it to provide comfort to a dying friend, or to provide comfort to himself as his own death came near. Regardless, its references to God's nearness at the the end of life provide comfort to people experiencing death. It's written as a prayer, but with a clear certainty that the prayer has already been answered.

As we sing it together, don't look at your watch, or think about where you are going to lunch, or worry about how you sound. Pay attention to the words, and be encouraged by this reminder that our God abides with us. He will never leave us or forsake us. He will be with us even as we make our transition from this life to that next. As you think about his faithfulness to abide with us, be inspired to abide with him, not only in death, but in life, so that you can experience the fullness of his salvation.