

“What Do We Have in Common?
Isaiah 5:1-7; 1 Corinthians 3:1-11;
Philemon 1:3-7; John 15:1-9

Pastor Norman Fowler
First Presbyterian Church of Moscow
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Abide. I feel a little like I should be holding a little bottle and say, “Abide—the new fragrance from...” Because how often do we use the word “abide?” It’s one of those words we don’t use much. But here it is in this Gospel text. It’s all about abiding, it seems like. So what does it mean to abide?

I always think about *abide* as the verb form of *abode*. It is to abide someplace. *Abode* is a house; *abiding* is living someplace. When I looked up the dictionary meaning, I found out that I was archaic in thinking that. *Dwelling* someplace is an archaic meaning of the word *abide*. However, I think that our text was thinking more along my lines because the Greek word behind it does have the sense of a dwelling, a place. These days, the word has come to mean “staying with it” or “paying attention to” something, as in, “I’ll abide by the rules.” That isn’t a bad thing, to pay attention to something.

That Idea of abiding, dwelling, got me thinking about where I abide. Where is it I dwell? Where do I stay? What do I hold on to? In one sense, I have a house and I abide there. But in a more metaphorical sense, where do I abide? Where do I live out my life? What are my priorities, for example, that show where I abide? What takes up my time? As I begin to think about where I abide, I think about the description Jesus gives us of a branch abiding in a vine, and that it’s an invitation to us to abide in him and to abide in his love.

One of the things I think about when I think about a home is that it’s a place where I get rest, where I get nourishment, where it’s comfortable. So where do I get my nourishment? Where do I get my rest? What helps me rejuvenate for the new day? Where is it that I abide?

Jesus talked about abiding in the vine, and that as we do that, as we pay attention to him, as we abide with him, he says the vine grower is God. He describes God as the one who comes and helps the vine by tying it up, pruning it. When I first thought about that idea that God ties up the vine, I thought, “I don’t like to be tied up.” But I realized, when I think about my life, there are all kinds of things that tie me up all the time. Think about all the busyness in our lives. What is it that ties us up and takes up our time?

What is it that this description of God is about? When God ties up the vine, it helps the vine. It gets the vine off the ground, gives it more air, opens it to the sun. The pruning would be helpful in making the vine healthier and more productive.

So what is it we’re tied up with? Are we tied up with God? Are we tied up with something that gives us life or are we tied up with stuff that detracts or takes away? I need to look at my priorities to help me understand that. That’s one way that I can begin to understand what I’m tied up with and whether it’s with God. So as Jesus

invites us to abide with him and recognize that he is the place where we can get our nourishment and refreshment, and that we are connected as a branch to the vine, we will be more full of life and productive.

Another thing that I got to thinking about in describing that is looking at a branch, and realizing that that branch can only be right where it is, attached to the vine, if it's going to live. I can't take it off somewhere else all by itself. The point is that in general, for a branch to live, it needs to be connected to the vine. When it's connected to the vine, it's next to all the other branches. Because there is a common vine, it becomes part of a community, part of the plant. So when we talk about cultivating community, it means allowing our lives to be shaped in a way in which we are connected to the vine and together to the community of faith. Once we're here making some kind of connection, what happens to the branch. We expect over time for it to grow and to produce grapes. Isn't that what was being talked about in Isaiah? As God invites us in to know where we get nourishment and refreshment, and as God invites us to know the wonder of that grace and love, that then we are to grow and to be healthy. That's wonderful in itself. But then there are the grapes. Our lives begin to produce something as well. What is it? Is it sour grapes, or are they sweet? God invites us to produce sweet grapes, described in Isaiah as justice and righteousness. God invites, as we abide with him, to let ourselves grow and produce what is sweet.

I think the Philemon passage points this out when Paul says, "I pray that your fellowship in faith..." He is recognizing that as we allow ourselves to abide in the vine, we have that fellowship in faith. That fellowship is the word "koinonia" which is often translated as "sharing" –sharing our lives. So it's about that sharing. "...that your fellowship in faith may come to expression in the full knowledge of the good work we can do for Christ." Again, he's talking about those sweet grapes that we can produce, the goodness that we can express for Christ.

Then you have to think about what that goodness is. What is the sweetness of our lives? How are we not sour grapes, but sweet? That idea that it's for Christ, I think, helps us out because we know what Christ was about. He's about bringing God's love, about showing a new way, about giving us life, so it's about the ways that we help out with that, how we share in that goodness and grace, how we show love. We can begin to look at our actions and to determine whether they seem sweet or sour.

I think we all have a sense of what Christ is about and the love he calls us to, the goodness that we can do for Christ. So using a phrase that is popular right now, maybe we should just do it. But, it's interesting to me that that's not exactly what Paul says. He doesn't say, "just do it." When I recognized that, it made me think about that phrase, "just do it." What am I supposed to do? Anything? There are some things that I think about that if I did them it would not be good. There's a subtle sense in that phrase that you should do whatever you want to do. It's all about me. I realize that's not good. What I see in this phrase from Philemon is Paul saying to do it in the full knowledge of the good. How do you have full knowledge of the good? You have to think about it. So often, the sense is that I just want to do something and yet he's inviting us here to

recognize that abiding in the vine is just not going and doing anything. Part of that abiding is thinking about what it means, working it out together, coming up with what the good is that we can do for Christ. We don't just do it; we think about it and we work at it together. So as we think about what it means to be cultivating community it's that idea that not only are we personally connected to God, but that connection brings us together to produce something that's sweet—the good we can do for Christ. Then we truly will abide in his love.

So as we think about that, what I realized is that as much as I may want to do that, there are times and things in my life that get in the way. There are also things that I may want to do differently or do more of. Can you think of something that you want God to help you with so that it doesn't interfere with your abiding in him, or something you want to work more on that allows you to abide more fully? Maybe it's to worship more. It could be to have more fellowship with folks that can help me understand the love and grace of God. Maybe I want to read scripture more, to study more, to pray more. Or, if I could just move myself out of being busy with this, I think that I'll be more able to abide in Christ. Think about what you could do in your life that either removes a barrier or lets your roots grow more deeply into that abiding. What can I do? Then we can grow more deeply in our lives and abide more fully in the love of Christ.

Gracious God, it's an incredible gift you give us in Christ, to be offered a way to abide in and with you, through him and in him, that by his love and through your grace in him we are able to know more fully the life you give us. You promise that as we abide in you we will be tended, maybe tied up a bit, in a way that leads us to more fully live a more abundant life, a more productive giving of your grace. So Lord, help us let go of the things that get in the way. Let us move fully into you. Let our roots grow more deeply. Let us recognize and address in our lives that which allows us to abide in you and be your people and together to be your vineyard, to be the place that produces the sweetness that you would have us produce, the very wonder of life. Through Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.