

Early in July a violent thunderstorm swept through our area. The rain was torrential and the wind was just fierce. Lots of our neighbors lost trees in the storm. The morning after the storm I walked through our yard to assess the damage. While we didn't lose any trees, our lawn was littered with branches. Some of those branches had been dead for a long time, but others had been very much alive.

One tree in particular in our yard had a branch that was broken from the trunk of the tree, but still too connected to fall to the ground. It was too high up for me to cut down so I've been watching it for the last few weeks. Because it's no longer securely connected to the tree's trunk it's been slowly dying. The leaves are withering and the wood is turning a darker brown. I don't think it'll be too many more storms before I find that branch laying on my lawn, ready for the wood pile. Keep that image in mind as you listen to our scripture reading today from John 15. We're going to discover that what's true of trees is also true of grapevines, and of our lives.

What we just heard is part of a much larger section of John's gospel in which Jesus is teaching his disciples on the night before his crucifixion. Knowing that he was just hours away from death, I imagine that Jesus was feeling some urgency to teach his disciples what mattered most. Though the disciples would have the Holy Spirit with them, just as we do, Jesus was about to hand over his mission to them. What did they need to hear? What was most essential for them to know in order to thrive as disciples? What Jesus says about the vine and the branches is part of the answer. And it's still essential for those who want to thrive as disciples today. Let's read the text together. [READ TEXT IN NRSV].

Obviously Jesus isn't giving a horticultural lecture here. He's not really talking about vines and branches and grapes. He's talking about disciples like Peter, James and John. And he's talking about disciples like you and me and how we grow in spiritual aliveness and thrive in the world. Here's what I think Jesus is saying.

Jesus is the source of life for every disciple. We are connected to Jesus by grace through faith. Staying connected to Jesus is what makes us spiritually alive. And as a natural consequence of staying connected to Jesus our lives bear fruit – things like love, joy, peace, patience and kindness. That's the aliveness of Jesus showing itself in our lives. And the purpose of that spiritual fruit is to reproduce, to make new disciples. When we live the love, joy, peace, patience and kindness of Jesus in daily life people often want to know what makes us different, which opens the door for us to tell them about Jesus, inviting them to get connected by faith too.

Now here's what I find really interesting, and critical, about today's scripture reading. Jesus doesn't command the disciples to bear fruit. That seems to be a natural outcome of being alive in Jesus. The only thing that Jesus commands the disciples to do is to stay connected to him, to the vine. Jesus put it this way, "Abide in me as I abide in you." To "abide" simply means to stay connected, to persist in staying

close. And that is what Jesus says is most important for disciples to know and to do – abide in Jesus, stay connected to Jesus, persist in staying close in Jesus.

We might think about it this way. I can live under the same roof with my wife, Nancy, or I can abide with her. Living under the same roof means that we share space. Abiding with her means that we stay connected at the heart level. We stay in tune with one another. We communicate with one another. We refuse to allow the storms of life to separate us. We love one another. That's what it means to abide.

And that's true when it comes to our abiding with Jesus. Sure, we can belong to a church and even come to worship regularly, but if that's little more than fulfilling our religious duty, we're not abiding. To abide with Jesus invites us to stay connected with Jesus at the heart level. To engage in worship, not just for what we can get out of it but to give Jesus what Jesus deserves...our hearts and our praise. To abide with Jesus means to be in tune with Jesus through spiritual practices, knowing his heart and thoughts. To abide means to refuse to allow the winds of hardship to cause us to doubt Jesus' love for us. It's a daily awareness, and a daily practice. And it's what keeps us spiritually alive and bearing the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience and kindness.

Jesus also said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Remember that tree branch in the tree in my yard? When it was no longer connected to the trunk of that tree it began to slowly die. Its leaves withered and the branch no longer remained supple. In the same way there are signs of spiritual deadness when we don't abide in Jesus, when we don't stay intimately connected to the source of our spiritual life. Those signs include focusing on our lack instead of Jesus' abundance, obsessing about our problems rather than trusting in God's goodness, turning inward on ourselves rather than outward toward our neighbor, holding tightly to what we have rather than sharing generously with those in need. These are all signs of dying spiritually when we don't stay connected to Jesus, when we don't abide.

This whole issue of abiding with Jesus, and the spiritual aliveness that it creates, has been increasingly important in my own spiritual journey in the last few years. You might think that going to seminary makes you super spiritual and teaches you how to abide with Jesus, but that wasn't true for me. Seminary taught me how to think about Jesus, but it didn't teach me how to abide with Jesus, how to open myself up to a heart-to-relationship with Jesus. And when faith merely dwells between your ears it doesn't transform you.

Let me share something that I've learned abiding with Jesus. In order to abide more fully with Jesus I have to make more room in my life for Jesus. My life is like a drawer. It can only hold so much. If I want to fill that drawer with something that's really important I'm going to need to remove from that drawer some things that are less important. Like you, my life is full and often too busy. I'm distracted

with all sorts of things. Some days it feels as if my brain is a popcorn machine gone out of control! And when I live that way, when I live distracted, I'm not abiding with Jesus. I believe that Jesus is still with me, but I'm not thinking about Jesus. I'm not conscious of Jesus' presence. And so I've found that in order to abide more with Jesus I need to stop. I need to make time and inner space for Jesus, to allow my mind to dwell on the love, faithfulness, kindness and forgiveness of Jesus.

Here's another way to think about it. Back in July I did a little traveling without my wife. As much as I enjoyed my travels, I don't like being apart from Nancy for more than a day or two. Every now and again during that trip, usually before I went to bed, I would stop and look at a picture of her on my tablet. I would think about what a gift she is to me. I would think about how kind and fun and supportive and loving she is. In some ways I suppose that process made me miss her more, but in another way it filled me with joy and made me feel as if she were right there with me.

That's not unlike what I do on a daily basis to abide with Jesus. For me it works best first thing in the morning before the day gets hectic. I set aside time, set the cares and concerns of the day aside, and then I dwell on Jesus. I abide in Jesus. I might read scripture. I might journal. I might pray. Or I might just sit in silence. And when I do that, somehow it carries me into the day with a great awareness of Jesus' love for me and my love for Jesus. I want to commend that practice to you. If you're new to the practice just commit five minutes each day.

"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." Those words have proven true in my experience. I'm so grateful that Jesus chooses to abide in each one of us. Now I want to us to take a moment to practice abiding in him...