

Sermon preached at Gisborne, 2 May 2021

O God, our guide, set your path clearly before us and lead us to follow you willingly for the sake of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

Abiding in the Father's love

Dwelling places are important in any cultures or countries as well as in scripture. Jesus didn't have any dwelling place during his ministry.¹ But wherever he went, Jesus was able to live in a new realm, a new time by abiding in the Father's love always. From the readings today, we'll learn what it means to abide in the Father's love through the vine imagery, the meaning of the word 'abide,' and bearing the fruits in the Father's love.

The relationship between the vine and the vine grower

The relationship with the vine (Jesus) and the vine grower (the Father) is organic and inseparable. The vine grower cares for the vine from planting to growing. In return, the vine produces the fruits for the vine grower. In scripture, the vine imagery is common to express the relationship with God and God's people. In the Old Testament, Israel is often described as a vine or vineyard, but in a negative sense. In Jeremiah 2:21, God said, "Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" Here, Israel was the vine that didn't grow as expected and became subject to judgment. A choice vine or noble vine means the Jewish fathers - Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob who had the true and right seed of grace in them. As such, they also brought forth much fruit. Yet their descendants - Israel became the wild vine as they failed to abide in the vine grower - God.

In John 15:1-8, we see another vine imagery. Jesus is the vine, and the disciples/believers are the branches. Here the vine is the true vine. In John, the word 'true' or 'truth' are used a number of times. It is a keyword to describe how Jesus has the right relationship with the Father as Jesus embodies the Father's love in person. By sending the beloved son to the fallen world, God showed that He didn't want to see the world perish. But the Father's love in the vine

¹ Matthew 8:20, And Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head."

imagery also includes pruning. The vine grower removes every branch that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he also prunes to make it bear more fruit.² Can we call it tough love, then?

The Cambridge dictionary defines ‘tough love’ as ‘a way of dealing with someone who has a problem in which you do not show a lot of kindness so that they try to solve it themselves.’ Tough love requires people’s behavioural changes voluntarily while limiting the grace and love that they have received. But the pruning in the Father’s love firstly involves Godself, whose nature is to love, not to make us love Him. It is ‘self - giving love’ (Greek: *agape*) that is concerned with the welfare of the other. When Jesus stood before Pilate, he was silent as if a lamb was silent before it was led to the slaughter.³ Here the oppression and the affliction that Jesus had had show us how we abide in the Father’s love. While the whole world was condemning him, he didn’t defend or excuse himself but abiding in the Father’s love. The power of love revealed through Jesus, who had been able to cover the multitudes of sins including the oppressors’. In this way, the vine could produce much fruit. So what does the word ‘abide’ mean, and how do we know we abide in Christ and Christ abide in us?

The word – ‘abide’

In John 14:1-6, the promise of God’s abiding presence in Christ already appears in Jesus’ words.⁴ Here, Jesus speaks of ‘dwelling places’⁵ in the Father’s house prepared for those who believe. The use of the same word in John 14:23 makes it clear that abiding in God’s presence is not primarily about our going to heaven, but rather Jesus’ promise as resurrected Lord to come and be with his followers.⁶ If so, how do we know that we abide in Christ?

1 John 4:12 reads, “No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives (Greek: *meno*) in us, and his love is perfected in us.” We believe that although we haven’t seen God, God remains (*meno*) in us. The Greek word *meno* means dwelling in a particular place - remaining there - abiding there. When it comes to relationships, *meno* suggests steadfast relationship - heart and soul unity. As such, when we love each other with *agape* love (selfless love), then

² John 15:2

³ Isaiah 53:7 - He was oppressed, and he was afflicted, yet he did not open his mouth; like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep that before its shearers is silent, so he did not open his mouth.

⁴ In my Father’s house, there are many dwelling places. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you?

⁵ The Greek word *mone* (μονή) – dwelling place, is from the same root as *meno*, abide

⁶ John 14:23

we have a heart and soul union with God. That's when we know that we abide in the Father's love in Christ. So what does it mean to us today?

Bearing the Fruits in the Father's love

In our story time, we heard the story of Pinocchio. The question was, "why didn't Pinocchio want to go back to his father?" Having a long nose and donkey's ears, Pinocchio knew that he had been very naughty against his Father's wish. At the end of the story, it was Geppetto – the Father's love - who went out to the sea in search of Pinocchio. They were able to be reunited as a family in the belly of the whale. Although they were in danger, the bond of love strengthened. For the first time, Pinocchio realized that it was the Father's love that made him live. And he did all his might to save his Father. Where is the pruning part in this story, then? Eventually, Pinocchio realized that his father risked his own life in search of his son. It is when all the past and present wrongdoings that had dominated Pinocchio lost the power. In the end, the Father's love set him free. By the time they escaped from the belly of the whale, Pinocchio was a new real person similar to Jonna, who had to spend three days in the belly of the whale before he was sent to Nineveh to proclaim the repentance of sins. Pinocchio was restored in the Father's love and became a real human boy. It was the fruit of the love, indeed.

When we love one another, it is when we bear much fruit in the Father's love. The context of John 15 is critical as Jesus is preparing the disciples for his absence. He is going where they cannot come. But they will continue what Jesus has been doing although the world continually distrusts and hates them as they did to Jesus.⁷ Today we are experiencing the same distrust and hatred in the forms of indifference and rejection of the good news. How do we overcome it while being truthful to the good news? For our continuing reflection, we may explore questions as follows:

1. When Jesus says – 'Abide in me as I abide in you,' how do we deliver this message of love in this pluralistic society?
2. What kind of pruning may we need individually and as a church?

May God help us abide in the Father's love continually and bear much fruit for the years to come. Amen.

⁷ John 15:18-19