

**ABIDE**

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

This being now my second spring in Stamford I continue to be astounded by the beauty of everything in bloom, first the forsythia, then the magnolias, the cherry trees, all kinds of fruit trees, the dogwoods, the azaleas, the lilacs and soon to come the rhododendron – each bush and tree so lush and full of blooms. One particular tree that always catches my eye as I drive to or from work is a beautiful huge dogwood on someone’s front yard on W. Broad Street. What makes the tree stand out for me is not simply that it is a beautiful tree in full bloom, but that the same tree has both pink and white flowers. Someone must have grafted pink dogwood branches onto the roots of a white dogwood tree when it was little, or vice versa and then carefully pruned it. The tree has since grown huge. Half its blossoms are pink and half its blossoms are white, all intertwined. I think that’s a wonderful image of the Church.

In the Baptismal Covenant, after we affirm what we believe in the Apostles Creed, we continue on to elaborate what we have to *do* in order to live fully into that Covenant. We answer 5 questions (you can see them on p. 304-305 in the BCP):

- Will you continue in the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in the prayers?
- Will you persevere in resisting evil, and, whenever you fall into sin, repent and return to the Lord?
- Will you proclaim by word and example the Good News of God in Christ?
- Will you seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself?
- Will you strive for justice and peace among all people, and respect the dignity of every human being?

The questions ask us if we will *bear fruit* in a number of different ways. Like the two-toned dogwood tree the fruit that the church is called to produce is lush and multi-hued. Will we bear fruit through being a living and active participant in the Church of Christ? Will we bear fruit through changed hearts and lives, through confession of our sins and repentance? Will we bear fruit through evangelism proclaiming both by our words and actions the good news of God in Christ? Will we bear fruit through loving and serving our neighbors as ourselves? And finally will we bear fruit through serving the cause of justice for those who are oppressed and working for peace instead of war?

The answer to each of those questions is not a simple “yes” or “no.” We don’t say, “*Sure, I’ll do that.*” No! Each answer to those five questions represents the most basic of all prayers: *HELP!* Not, “*I will,*” or “*I’ll try,*” but rather “*I will with God’s help.*” If those five Baptismal questions represent the variety of ways that Christ’s life is meant to bear fruit in us, they also represent the variety of ways in which we are called to *abide in*

*Christ.* For it is only *with God's help* – through *abiding* in Christ – that we can begin to want to do those things. It is only *with God's help* – through *abiding in Christ* – that we can find the strength and the power to do them.

The word “*abide*” is central to our Johanne scriptures this morning. “*Abide*” occurs 6 times and is implied one more time in the passage from 1 John 4:7-21. “*Abide*” occurs 8 times in John 15:1-8. Any word that is repeated 15 times in our scripture lessons is one we should pay close attention to.

In the Gospel of John Jesus tells us to *abide in him*.

*Abide in me, Jesus said, as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ...Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit... Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers... If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish and it will be done for you.*

1) One of the key things this passage tells us is that YES we can *abide* in Christ. Using Jesus' own illustration of branches of a vine, we are not natural branches of that vine, but God has *grafted* us on to that vine. The very fact that we can *abide* in Christ as branches *abide* in a vine comes through grace because God has made that connection. Through God taking our part in the life of Jesus, through Jesus' death and resurrection, we are connected to God through Christ.

2) A second thing the passage tells us about abiding in Christ is that we will be *cleansed* or *pruned*. A branch of a grape vine, if allowed to, will grow wild. An unpruned grape plant will put all its energy in growth and practically none in fruit production. It will grow all over the place but it will produce very little fruit. Since growing sweet fragrant grapes is the object of grape growing the plant needs to be pruned. Fruit-producing branches are cut way back almost to the vine and non fruit-producing branches are cut off, so that the plant might produce good fruit. Jesus tells us that we need to be pruned and that his Father is the vinegrower who does the pruning.

We tend to call that process of pruning – “*our trials and tribulations*.” Now I don't believe for an instant that God causes us to have troubles and grief and hardships so that we can become stronger and produce better fruit. No. But God the vinegrower uses those troubles, grief and hardships – if we let him – to his purposes to help us grow in love and service and understanding. God does not cause harm to his children but he uses hard times to help us grow in him. For pruning with God is not done without our participation. God gives us freewill and we are participants with him both in *abiding* in Christ and also in *pruning*.

3) If we do not *abide* in Christ we are as useless to his Kingdom, as useless to his love and mission in the world as a branch broken off from the vine. Jesus makes it very clear in this passage that if we do not *abide* in him that we are powerless. In Christ we can bear fruit but apart from him we can do nothing. If we do not *abide* in Christ we are

wordless. Only if we *abide* in Christ does his Word – his life, his truth, his love – abide in us. If we do not *abide* in Christ we are prayer-less. *Abiding* in Christ is prayer. If we cut ourselves off we are without a prayer. Likewise apart from Christ we will not be able to bear the fruit of his Kingdom.

The First Letter of John tells us several more important things about *abiding* in Christ. 1) *“By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. To abide in Christ is to let his life flow through us. But God doesn’t just allow us to be connected to him; we are more than conduits of his grace. He literally places his very life in us. He gives us his essence, his Spirit. His life inside us is part of how we know we are connected, that we abide.*

2) A second thing we learn about *abiding* in 1 John is that our most basic Christian confession is both our attachment to Christ and flows out of it. John writes: *“God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God.* It is indeed that basic confession of faith, that trust of Jesus as the one who can help us, who can set us free, which forms the attachment of branch to vine.

3) The third thing we learn about *abiding* in 1 John is that in abiding in God we abide in love. John writes that *“those who abide in love abide in God and God abides in them.”* He goes on to conclude that anyone who claims to love God but hates his or her brother or sister in Christ is a liar. *Abiding* in God means *abiding* in God’s love for one another. If we don’t let God’s love flow through us to our brothers and sisters in Christian community then the flow of God’s love in us is interrupted; it’s blocked. We are no longer *abiding*.

The variety of lush, abundant, wonderful fruit Christ expects his Church to produce is astounding. Imagine a dogwood tree in pink, white, purple and yellow! But it is only possible if we *abide* in him and let his love *abide* in us. We don’t have to try and do it ourselves. In fact we can’t. But Christ Jesus can. We can commit ourselves to the challenging task of *abiding* in Christ and bearing fruit. We can proclaim in connection with all the ways God challenges us to abide in him that *yes, “I will with God’s help.”*