**Pruning & Abiding**

**John 15:1-8**

**Isaiah 5:1-7**

6/14/15

Thought for Meditation:

Where do I abide? I rejoice that I abide in Christ. I will go so far as to say that in some sense I am grateful for my homelessness… There is a sense in which my peripatetic life, in which I belong neither to Scotland nor the United States has made me a good candidate for finding deep, emotionally satisfying and theologically legitimate meaning in the idea of having my home in Christ. *Andrew Purves, Professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. He was born and raised in Scotland and lived in the USA since 1978.*

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What is the fruit that your life is producing? God doesn’t want us just to come to church or to be nice people. Those are important, but God’s goal for us is a healthy and mature Christian life that produces fruit. In our New Testament lesson this morning, Jesus tells us that there are at least two essential aspects of a healthy and mature Christian life.

First, a healthy Christian life involves pruning. After I graduated from college my parents put a pool in their backyard. My Dad used to get frustrated with the trees that our neighbors had planted. They grew along the fence that separated our yards. The branches from these trees hung over into our yard and dropped needles into our pool. Every month or so my Dad would get out his long-handled saw or clippers and prune the trees up the fence line. Within a few months the branches grew back so Dad would need to prune again.

One summer I helped my Dad with the pruning. Rather than pruning “up the fence,” I pruned as far over the fence as I could reach. When Dad saw what I had done he was horrified. He worried that the neighbors would notice how much I had cut off and be angry. We walked around the block and looked over their roof at the trees and you couldn’t see any difference from that side. The neighbors never said a thing. It was more than a year later until we had to prune again.

Now, I don’t claim to be an expert at pruning. There is an art and a science to doing it well. On the other hand, I’m usually not afraid to prune and to take off more than just a little snip here and there. We have some azaleas in our side yard. Until last summer I had never pruned them. Last summer, after they bloomed, I thinned them out and whacked them way back. I wondered what they would look like this spring, if they would have any flowers. I’m happy to say that they were gorgeous this spring, covered with flowers. Pruning is an essential part of healthy plants.

Jesus knew this. In our passage in John he talks about two types of pruning. In verse 2 Jesus says that the vinegrower “removes every branch … that bears no fruit” (John 15:2a). In a vineyard each vine is usually planted about 5-10 feet apart from the next vine. There is a trellis between the plants and the branches grow on the trellis. On the bulletin cover you can see wires that the branches grow on. The vinegrower will go out in February or March and prune the branches way back. I remember the first time I saw a vine that had just been pruned. I couldn’t believe how much of the plant had been cut off. I thought they had killed it. But by the end of the season the branches had grown and filled in. They were covered with grapes.

The second type of pruning is mentioned in the second part of verse 2. “Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit” (John 15:2b). After the branches have grown back and the fruit has started growing, there are new branches that will keep growing. However, because they started late they won’t produce any fruit. Normally, in July or August the vinegrower will prune off these new branches so that all the energy of the plant can go to the fruit.

In verse 3 Jesus makes a statement that isn’t completely clear in the English. “You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you” (John 15:3). What isn’t clear in most translations is that the word “pruned” in verse two, and the word “cleansed” in verse 3, are the same word. It is the Greek word  (catharsis). The point is this, just as the vinegrower prunes the branches, the Father prunes us so that we might be healthy. God takes a sharp knife and cuts out those parts of our lives that are not bearing fruit. God does it to individuals and to the church. It is not fun to be pruned, but it is an essential part of growing in our faith. God prunes us so that we can produce fruit.

At some point in our lives most, if not all, of us will need to be pruned. This pruning may involve struggling with our health or with a relationship. It may be losing your job or some sort of inner turmoil. As people go through those difficult times they sometimes wonder why God is punishing them. I’ve heard people say “I guess God is getting me back for the sins in my life.”

Let me remind you that the punishment for our sin was put on Jesus. He died and took the punishment that we deserved. In the difficult times God is not punishing us. Maybe we are paying the consequences of our sins. Or, maybe God is pruning us and preparing us to produce more fruit. God knows that the spiritual growth we need will come through the pain and struggle.

Do you remember Liberace, the flamboyant entertainer who played the piano. He would play popular music or even classical music in a simple but beautiful way. This is how he described what he did: “My whole trick is to keep the tune well out in front. If I play Tchaikovsky, I play his melodies and skip his spiritual struggles.” I think many of us would like to skip the spiritual struggles, but I have a sense that a healthy Christian life is more like Tchaikovsky than Liberace.

Friends, skipping the spiritual struggles will hinder our spiritual growth. Some of you are going through difficult times right now. Others will face challenges in the future. As you go through that pain, know that God is not punishing you. Instead, trust that God is pruning you so that you will grow in your faith and produce fruit.

That is a challenging idea. It might raise the question, what are we supposed to do during those difficult times. That leads to the second part of a healthy Christian life. We are all called to abide in Christ. Jesus says “Abide in me as I abide in you” (John 15:4a). In four verses Jesus uses the word “abide” eight times.

The word abide is a relationship word. It is a word of connection. Sometimes it’s translated as remain in Jesus or live in him, or even rest in Jesus. Now, there are two ways that Jesus’ words can be understood. It could be that they are a challenge to maintain and develop your relationship to Jesus. “***If*** you stay connected to Jesus then he will stay connected with you.” We all need to be reminded of that challenge at times. Put some effort into your relationship with Christ, into growing in your faith. However, these words can also be understood as an encouragement. Jesus says, “You ***can*** stay close to me because I will stay close to you.” Probably we need to hear these words as both a challenge and an encouragement. We need to work at our relationship with Jesus but we also need to trust that Christ is at work in our lives.

Andrew Purves was born and raised in Scotland. It only takes a few seconds listening to him to recognize his wonderful Scottish burr. He moved to the United States in 1978. He was the pastor at Hebron Presbyterian Church over in Clinton before he became a professor at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. The Thought for meditation has a quote from one of his books, about being homeless, not in the literal sense but in a spiritual sense. He doesn’t have a home that gives his life meaning and identity. He’s been away from Scotland long enough that it really isn’t home, just like California isn’t home for me. Yet western Pennsylvania isn’t really home either.

Those of you who have lived in western Pennsylvania your whole life may not understand that. There is something attractive to staying in the same place your whole life, rooted and connected. However, there is an advantage to not having a home. It helps us focus on abiding in Christ, living in him and staying connected to him.

There are countless ways to stay connected to Christ – worship, prayer, service, any of the spiritual disciplines. Let me mention one way that Jesus talks about in our passage. We abide in Christ by reading the Word. Jesus tells us that we have been cleansed, or pruned, by the Word. He also says “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you” (John 15:7a). We need to be reading the Word.

John Calvin, our Presbyterian forefather, has a wonderful word picture that shows how important it is for to be reading the Bible.

Just as old or bleary-eyed men (that didn’t bother me when I first read that 30 years ago. I didn’t need glasses back then.), just as old or bleary-eyed men and those with weak vision, if you thrust before them a most beautiful volume, even if they recognize it to be some sort of writing, yet can scarcely construe two words, but with the aid of spectacles will begin to read distinctly; so Scripture, gathering up the otherwise confused knowledge of God in our minds, having dispersed our dullness, clearly shows us the true God.

*John Calvin, Institutes I.VI.1*

I’m at that point now that I can’t read anything without my glasses. In the same way, we need the Bible to know Christ, to hear God, to abide in Jesus.

 Elizabeth Barrett Browning, the English poet, married Robert Browning. Her parents were very unhappy. They were so upset with the marriage that they disowned her. She and her new husband settled in Florence, Italy. Elizabeth loved her parents. She wrote two to three letters a month, long and expressive letters. For ten years they never responded, but she continued sending letters to them.

 One day she received a package from her parents. She was so excited – she ripped it open. Inside were all the letters that she had sent to her parents, unopened. She had poured out her love to them and they hadn’t read any of it.

 The Bible is God’s love letter to us. Have you opened it? Do you read it on a regular basis? If you are not reading God’s word you will not know who God is, what God does or what God wants. You will not know the depth of God’s love for you. I’m not talking about just listening to the Bible on Sunday morning as it is read and preached in worship. I’m talking about each person spending a few minutes on a regular basis, every day or even at least three to four times a week, reading God’s Word. Abide in Jesus by reading his word.

 Henry Lyte, an Anglican pastor in England, went to visit an old friend who was dying. During their visit, his friend, W.A. Le Hunte, kept repeating one phrase over and over – “Abide with me.” It was his prayer as he approached death. Lyte took that phrase, and as his own health deteriorated, wrote a poem with eight stanzas. Five of them are in our Hymnal and we are going to sing three of them. It is about dying using the image of evening, neither of which, I hope, are close by. However, the message is one we can all make as our own prayer.

Abide with me…. In life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.