

*Title: Called to Bear Fruit*

4/19 Sermon – 3rd Sunday of Easter and Confirmation Sunday

Rev. Lindsey Odom

Reading from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 1:4-10

Reading from the New Testament: John 15:1-8

Confirmands, this passage from John 15 has been on my heart as I have thought about your journey of Confirmation, had the opportunity to teach each of you, and have prayed for you. It is my hope and prayer that through the Spirit, it will also speak to the hearts of many others as well.

Friends, it is spring! The trees are blooming, the days are growing longer and warmer, and everywhere we look, creation is coming alive. Even the air itself seems full, full of life, full of growth, and full of what the earth needs to flourish. We can see all around us that something is happening beneath the surface, something steady and life-giving, doing exactly what it was created by God to do. And Jesus, in our Gospel reading today, draws a metaphor from nature – a simple vine full of branches, and says: this is what your life with me looks like. Through the vine and the branches metaphor that Jesus uses, he is teaching us what it means to live a life of faith.

In John 15, Jesus says: “I am the vine. You are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you.” In this one simple, yet profound statement, we are given both a gift and a calling. First, we are given a gift through our identity as God’s beloved children. Jesus says, “You are the branches.” Being a branch is not something we have to do or have to earn or achieve; rather, it is who we are. If you think about a branch, they don’t produce fruit by trying harder; rather, they produce fruit by staying connected. Friends, this is the language of grace and the language of belonging, all found in our covenantal relationship with God. This is the gift. And now here is the calling when Jesus says, “abide in me, as I abide in you.”

One of my favorite moments with this confirmation class happened after Epiphany Sunday, when one of them drew a “star word” to carry into the new year. The idea is that this

word can serve as a simple guide for the year ahead and as a way of noticing how God is at work in our lives, much like God led the Magi by a star to Jesus. One of them drew the word “grow,” and over the course of the year, as we studied this passage from John 15, that word took on deeper meaning. They began to see that following Christ means growing not only physically, but into Christ’s likeness, ministry, and teachings. They also spoke honestly about how hard that can be at their age, with the pressures of social media, friendships, school, sports, and expectations making it difficult to know where to begin. That honesty matters. Because Jesus does not expect us to have it all figured out; rather, Jesus just wants us to abide in him and his teachings.

The word, “abide” isn’t one we use in common conversation these days. It means to stay, to remain, to dwell, and to make our home in Christ. In a world that pulls us in many directions, Jesus calls us back to a place of simplicity, of being the branches. Just as a branch receives life from the vine, we receive life from Christ through prayer, study, Scripture, worship, service, and community. Like a weary traveler finally setting down their bags, like roots stretching deep into rich soil, like a friend lingering at the table long after the meal is over, like a child curled up into a parent’s lap knowing they are safe and loved, like a quiet moment shared with someone who understands you completely, like returning again and again to a place that feels like home where you don’t have to prove anything, we are invited to abide in Christ’s love and care for each one of us. The invitation to abide is an invitation to a deep trust.

Abiding in Christ helps us understand that we do not have to do anything or try to prove ourselves worthy; rather, Christ just calls us to abide and to stay connected to the One who gives us life. Henri Nouwen captures this beautifully when he says, “Abiding means living with, staying with, and remaining in the presence of the One who loves us (*Life of the Beloved: Spiritual Living in a Sacred World*).” Before we were born, God knew us and loved us already.

Before we ever chose Christ, Christ claimed us as his own. So, every one of us is invited to abide, to remain, and to dwell, NOT in ourselves, but in the life of Christ.

And as the branches, it is important to remember that branches only live when they remain connected to the vine. Apart from the vine, they wither and die, but connected to the vine, they bear fruit. In other words, apart from Christ, we do not simply struggle; rather, we wither. Or as John Calvin, theologian, pastor and reformer during the Reformation, puts it so plainly, we are like branches receiving life-giving sap from the vine, but cut off from him, we are nothing more than dry wood. Calvin says that our life begins when we are grafted into Christ, when we take root in him like a branch connected to a vine. When God grafts our lives in Christ, we live, we grow, we flourish, and we bear fruit. We become branches who bear fruit not by our own striving, but by the Spirit at work within us. Let us also remember that branches do not grow alone. Together, as the body of Christ, we are nourished by the same vine who is Christ. When we remain in Christ, God's love shapes our lives and helps us to bear fruit such as justice, mercy, compassion, care, love, grace, and hope.

So, the question we should consider is what are we connected to? Because the truth of the Gospel is not that we find life on our own. The truth is that life is given to us as a gift because of Christ. Christ clearly says: "I am the true vine" in verse 1. Any attempt of ours to ground our lives in something else such as success, achievement, approval, perfectionism, busyness, constant stimulation, recognition, wealth, materialism, or control will leave us empty. These things may look like life and growth for a short season, but they do not sustain us. They cannot give us what only Christ can give us. Even in Jesus's uncertainty and suffering on the cross, the vine (Christ) still gives life. So, maybe the question goes deeper than what are we connected to?

**Maybe we need to be asking ourselves these types of questions:**

- How can we allow, or even invite the life of Jesus to change the rhythms and routines of our daily lives?
- Why do we claim to “abide in Christ,” “know Christ,” or “put our trust in Christ” and yet continue on our way, with our daily rhythms /routines, and on the route of our choosing, not Christ’ choosing?
- What would it look like to abide in Christ in such a way that we “walk just as Christ walked” or “did as Christ did”? How would our pace be changed? Where would we slow down to be more fully present with God and with each other?

At the heart of John’s vine metaphor is this: we are bound together as people of faith, and as we abide in Christ, Christ’ light and love shape who we are becoming. So, let’s return for a moment to our first reading from Jeremiah. Because Jeremiah’s call story provides a glimpse into God’s call for us. When God calls Jeremiah, he responds and says, “I am only a boy.” In other words: I am not ready. I am not capable. I am not enough. And God responds, not by arguing Jeremiah into confidence, but by grounding him in something far deeper. God says, “Before I formed you in the womb, I knew you. Before you were born, I consecrated you and I appointed you...” Do you hear what God is doing? God is locating Jeremiah’s call, not in his ability, not in his readiness, not in his age, but in God’s actions. So, before Jeremiah speaks, God has already spoken. Before Jeremiah acts, God already claimed him. And, before Jeremiah chooses, God had already called him. This is the language of covenant. This is the language of grace.

After God reaches out and touches Jeremiah’s mouth and says, “Now I have put my words in your mouth,” Jeremiah is NOT sent on his own; rather, Jeremiah is sent with God’s presence, with God’s words, and with God’s authority. And finally, God gives Jeremiah a

purpose and call, which is “to pluck up and to pull down... to build and to plant (v. 10).” This calling for Jeremiah holds both tension and hope, tearing down what is broken, and nurturing what brings life. And friends, this is not just Jeremiah’s call story, it is also ours. This is the pattern of God’s call: God speaks, God claims us, God equips us, and God sends us out. And that brings us back to Jesus’ words in John 15. Because the same God who calls Jeremiah is the same person in Christ who says: “I am the vine. You are the branches.” The call does not end after being named and claimed by Christ; rather, it continues in being connected to Christ and to one another. In the same way that Jeremiah is called and then sustained by God, we, too, are called and invited to abide in Christ. Not because we are ready, but because God is faithful.

So, Confirmands, it is my hope that you can hear this and receive this. Your faith is not something you have to create from scratch; rather, your life of faith begins with Christ. Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann reminds us that “we are not self-made people; we are people who are summoned, called, and sustained by Christ (*The Prophetic Imagination*).”

Each of us have been called like Jeremiah. Each of us has been claimed through the Sacrament of Baptism. And each of us have been grafted into the vine, into Christ himself. And now, our calling is simple, though not always easy: stay connected, abide, and bear fruit. We belong to Christ because Christ has claimed us, grafted us into himself, and given us life. Just as in baptism we are named and claimed as God’s own, here Jesus reminds us that we are already connected to him. And as you remain rooted in Christ, may your lives bear fruit, such as the fruit of justice, mercy, compassion, care, love, grace, and hope that reaches far beyond you and into our world that is in need of it. Confirmands, this is your calling: to live so deeply connected to Christ that your lives make a real and lasting difference and become part of God’s work of renewing and restoring the world. Amen.