

**First Baptist Church of Augusta**  
**John 15:1-5 (Matthew 11:28-29)**  
***In His Own Words: I Am the Vine***  
**March 16, 2008**  
**Lent 2008**

NRS John 15:1 *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me 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. 5 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.*

NRS Matthew 11:28 *"Come to me, all you that are weary and are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. 29 Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. 30 For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."*

Do you like muscadines, those wild grapes that grow practically all over Georgia? I remember eating them as a kid during the summer. Several years ago, I lived near a trail where I would jog and when muscadines were ripe, they would fall all along the trail creating a slick and slippery surface. Deer love them, and I have a brother-in-law that picks them to make homemade wine.

For the most part, I never really noticed the muscadine vines in the woods, but when they hung heavy with fruit you could not mistake them.

Grape vines and fruit go together, they need each other, they belong. On the night that Jesus would be betrayed, in a week that we now call Holy Week, Jesus calls his small band of followers together and says: *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.* (John 15:5). "I am the vine," it's the seventh and last "I am" statement of Jesus, and it is a good one, because he speaks to the necessity of belonging together. To make the point, Jesus not only uses the imagery of vines and fruit, but he repeatedly speaks of abiding. Eleven times we hear the word "abide." It comes from the Greek word *meno*, and along with abide it can be translated as remain, stay, endure or dwell. It is not a word used that much in the New Testament outside of the Gospel of John. In fact, it is an old fashioned word that we rarely use today. One never passes a motel sign, for example, that reads "Abide with us tonight." Baseball announcers don't sum up an inning with "One hit, a walk and two abiding on base."

Eugene Peterson, in his book *The Message*, paraphrases verse four and the idea of abiding by writing: *"Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you."*

Abide. To abide with someone implies that you will join with another in their journey. In Matthew, Jesus shares a different image with the same meaning: *Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls.* (Matthew 11:29). The yoke is a harness where two animals are joined together for shared work. It is another image of abiding. "Abide in me" Jesus says. Like two oxen yoked together, like a vine and her fruit, each is necessary to the other. Through the picture of a vine and branches, Jesus has invited us to imagine about what the church could look like.

*A church could look like...*

1) A Community of Belonging

Have you ever noticed what branches of a vine look like? They look like a tangled mess, yet in its apparent chaos there is sharing. The branches are indistinguishable from one another and they are rooted

together by the same singular vine. The fruitfulness of each branch is dependant upon its relationship to the vine. All the branches share this in common.

This image is a difficult one considering our cultural model of individualism and privatism. In spite of all that Jesus says about abiding, I find myself doing a pretty lousy job at it. I like to think of myself as independent. I really do not need anyone, so the deception goes on. And so, I am reticent about sharing: "I can do this on my own; I don't need anyone's help." I even find myself taciturn about sharing personal prayer concerns, because deep down I am uncomfortable sharing with others that I need help.

Certainly, I am not alone. Harvard sociology professor, Robert Putnam, authored a book in 2000 titled, Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community. Putnam writes about how we have become increasingly disconnected from family, friends, neighbors, and social structures, whether the PTA, church, recreation clubs, political parties, or bowling leagues. The irony seems to be that the more electronically connected we are, the more isolated we have become as a society. According to an article in the Washington Post: "A quarter of Americans say they have no one with whom they can discuss personal troubles..." You are probably familiar with the Alltel cell phone company that advertises "My Circle" to include in your network of five friends. According to this same article the average American has only about two people they would consider as a close confidant.

Abide? Abiding is personal and intimate. I cannot speak for you, but it often seems easier to me to just go it alone, do it myself. In a study sponsored by Duke University, 70% of clergy say they have no close friends (Pulpit & Pew, 1991). Perhaps this comes out of insecurity or fearing to look weak or needy. Maybe abiding is a problem when we have been disappointed one time too many. Or, perhaps we flounder at abiding, because we are just too busy or have fooled ourselves into thinking we are too busy.

Authentic church, genuine community, takes seriously the metaphor of vine and branches. It leans in to hear this one named Jesus as he speaks of abiding. We live in and rooted in one another, dependent on Jesus the vine, and sharing together the fruits of our relationship. At our best, we look like a community of belonging.

*A church could look like...*

2) A Community of Mutuality

Simply put, authentic community, genuine church, means that there is no hierarchy among its members. It does not exist. No branch has a claim above any other. There is not status, rank or privilege among the branches.

What is it that makes us part of the vine? Jesus says, by the fruit. What is the fruit, you ask?

To love without discretion.

To love the neighbor as yourself.

To love the insider and the outsider and the somebody and the nobody.

To love, even when we may not be loved back, and to love in spite of all better judgment.

To love the unlovable, the unlikeable, and the unreachable.

To love the rich, to love the poor, to love the white collar, the blue collar, the soccer mom, and the welfare mom.

Let Jesus be the vine, God be the farmer, and we are the branches. To be a community of mutuality, is to accept that there is no hierarchy. God, and God alone, is the farmer, the one who shapes and prunes. Our job is to bear the fruit of the two great commandments: Love God and love others. Period.

*A church could look like...*

3) A Community of Anonymity

Simply put, to continue with Jesus' "I am" statement: branches are branches. We come and go. I know it sounds kind of harsh in light of our celebrity idolatry. All gifts and talents are important but no one gift or talent is most important.

Authentic church and genuine community is not built around individual accomplishments or successes. This church is built not upon "my way," but upon abiding in God's way.

Think how radical it would be if we would submit our personal agendas to the larger purpose of the community of Christ. I know we often feel like we do things with the best interest of the church, but how much more so if we recognize the beauty of being part of a larger whole.

Gail O'Day writes: "The mark of the faithful community is how it loves, not who are its members. There is only one gift, to bear fruit, and any branch can do that if it remains in Jesus" (*New Interpreters Bible*, vol. IX, p. 761).

Of course, imagining what it means to be an authentic church, a genuine community, comes down to how we decide to abide in Jesus.

Yet, even when we fail to abide in Jesus, Jesus abides with us still.  
When we have slept at dark Gethsemane, and the spirit is weak, Jesus  
holds vigil and abides over our fragile faith.  
When doubt stings our eyes, where belief has evaporated, Jesus abides in our unbelief.  
When fear overwhelms us and we sink beneath the sea of melancholy, Jesus abides  
in our despondency.

Abiding with Jesus calls for faithful attention to the presence of God around us and in us. This past week, a proud grandmother was relaying to me the story of her grandchild. Nora is not quite five years old, but she is old enough to say her prayers. One night she was talking to God and her mom was beside her listening along. At one point Nora was quiet. As her silence lingered her mother thought she would help her out and said, "Why don't you thank God for...", but Nora held her finger to her lips: "Shhh! I am listening!"

In a few moments we will sing our hymn of invitation, #63, *Abide with Me*. Listen with me to the beautiful last line:

*Hold thou thy cross before my closing eyes;  
shine through the gloom and point me to the skies.  
Heaven's morning breaks, and earth's vain shadows flee;  
in life, in death, O Lord, abide with me.*

In a world that offers disjointed sound bites, and where we find ourselves fitfully distracted, abiding is a beautiful gift that prepares us during this week we call Holy, and the Easter Hallelujah that is waiting for us.