

John 15:1-8
apart from Christ, you can do nothing
The 5th Sunday of Easter
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Every conversation begins somewhere. Even when you don't know where to begin, you start somewhere and go on. The same is true of a sermon. I want to begin with this simple invitation of Jesus – to live in him as a branch lives in the vine.

Of course, we could begin with the dire consequences of those burning branches, cut down and tossed away. It's possible in our personal lives to focus on the failure voice, reminding us incessantly not of our goodness but only of our failure and guilt. Those branches burning in the rubble of our failures are certainly real, but that is not all that is real. The burned branches don't define us totally. There is more to our story. The choice of where to begin and on what to focus our attention is always critical, because where you begin often determines where you end.

So rather than focusing on those burned and discarded branches, let's begin with Jesus' declaration followed by his gracious invitation: "I am the Vine, you are the branches." Abide in me as I abide in you." The context matters here, too. Jesus has told his disciples of his imminent departure. They are anxious and fearful. What will they do without their Lord? What will happen to them when he departs? Jesus answers those fears with this radical assurance that he will be with them in the most intimate way possible. It will be as if they are dwelling with each other.

In John's gospel, Jesus makes seven "I am" statements each of which evokes the name of God in Exodus 3:14, "I am who I am." I am the bread of life. I am the Light of the World. I am the door of the Sheep. I am the good shepherd. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth and the life. Now he declares - "I am the vine" - the seventh and last such statement.

Abide is one of those words whose meaning has shifted. We don't much use it the way Jesus intended. We speak of abiding by the rules, or call for law-abiding citizens. That is not what Jesus intends. He intends something intimate and personal; organic like a branch on a vine. *There is no question where Jesus is; he is living in his followers as organically as a vine and branches.*

Live in me, says Jesus, as I live in you, and your life will bear the fruit of God's life made visible in the world. This is Jesus' gracious invitation to the spiritual life. Then he makes one thing clear: apart from me, you can do nothing. Jesus' invitation is to live in him. It's a call to rest your being in the truth of his life within you. Christ's life within you will bear the fruit of God's life for the sake of this messy world where tragedies occur, people suffer and communities struggle.

The life that Jesus' calls us to live in him is not a vacation from reality. It's the only way to live that has any possibility of bearing fruit in this messy world. The root of our frustrations, the reason for our lack of virtue, the fracturing of communities and the breakdown of common social life is the consequence of living apart from the source of all life.

Apart from the living Christ within you, you can do nothing. That's a defeat for my self-assured ego and inner master-of-the-universe. But it's a happy defeat because the truth is a branch severed from the vine cannot live. You can exist, of course. Yet existing is not the same as living. Most of us know the difference between existing and living. Jesus is calling us to live, not merely exist. Living in Christ brings forth the fruit of God's life in the world, as naturally as a branch brings forth grapes that nourish life.

Living life in Christ involves pruning – cutting away. That can be a painful thing. We have a wild trumpet vine at our home. It must be pruned occasionally. It doesn't look so great after a good pruning, but in time it's abundantly beautifully laden with blossoms. This pruning is as necessary to the God-bearing life as it is to healthy vineyard. Here's the thing; the pruning is not cutting away what is "bad"; it is a natural pruning of even what is good, but growing out of control. It's necessary to prune in order to bear abundant fruit in world. Something will be pruned from your life and mine, and usually we do know what it is.

The Good News is that God knows what is necessary and we can confidently trust our lives to Christ.

Abide in me, says Jesus, because apart from me you can do nothing.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.
Amen.