

SQUASH, TURNIPS AND LETTUCE

Sermon, May 6, 2018

Text: John 15:1-17

Years ago I came across a little horticultural devotional by someone who compared the life of faith to cultivating a garden (*I have since found a few variations on that devotional, but will stay with the original one I found*). This author wrote that in the garden of his heart he would work to seed, plant and cultivate nine rows of produce. In the first three rows he would seed, plant and cultivate three rows of squash ... he would work to squash *gossip*, squash *criticism* and squash *indifference* in the garden of his heart. The next three rows he would seed, plant and cultivate three rows of turnips: turn up for church, turn up with a smile, and turn up to serve others. For the final three rows he would seed, plant and cultivate lettuce: let us be faithful, let us be unselfish ... and let us love one another.

I like that.

Jesus also uses a gardening metaphor in our Gospel reading today. Jesus talks about a type of garden very familiar to His first century audience, the garden of the vineyard. And in this garden God the Father is the gardener, or, as the Revised Standard Version puts it, the vinedresser. I chose for us to read from the Revised Standard Version this morning largely because (a) the choice of the English word "vinedresser" consistently carries through with Jesus metaphor of Himself as the Vine, and (b) one other word, a word Jesus repeats over and over again (*intimating that it's kind of an important word*), is translated differently in our pew Bibles. The word as translated by the Revised Standard Version is "abide." The NIV has "remain" rather than "abide;" and I much prefer "abide." "Remain" sounds so static, so inactive, so much like, "Stay put, sit still." When I'm about to leave the house, that's what I would say to my dog (or what I used to say to my dog; he passed away almost seven years ago). "*Sit. Stay. Don't do anything.*"

"Abiding" carries more of a connotation of *actively* living than simply "remaining" or "staying." The Pharisees had lots of "stay" commandments, lots of "don't be a bad dog" commandments, lots of commandments concerning what NOT to do ... requirements that seemed to define "righteousness" essentially by what you *don't* do ... "*don't do this, don't do that*" ... which is still how some define "righteousness." We think, "*As long as I don't do anything wrong, as long as I don't make mistakes, then I'll be OK. As long as I don't foul up, as long as I'm not a bad dog, I will be blameless.*" And it's not too far from that mindset to conclude that if we don't do *anything*, then we must be *righteous*. Sure, if we don't do anything, then we don't risk getting hurt, we don't risk getting misunderstood, we don't risk being wrong, we don't risk ... anything. Then, it's also only a short step to "*Everything wrong must be someone else's fault,*" because, well, we didn't do anything. I think it drove Jesus nuts when people would think that way. He wants His disciples to do, to live, to abide, to risk, to be engaged, to be active! Sure, if we don't do anything, then we don't risk making mistakes, we don't risk being misunderstood, we don't risk being wrong, we don't risk getting hurt, we don't risk ... anything. Nor do we *gain* anything or *contribute* anything. The life of faith is grotesquely reduced to, "*Don't be a bad dog!*" Jesus would never settle for that definition of righteousness, and neither should we.

The context of this passage in John 15 is that Jesus is about to leave. It's the night before His execution, the night He was to be betrayed; He is speaking to His disciples and it was just after their last supper together in this world. He tells them He is going away; He tells them they will one day be together again, and He tells them what to do in the meantime. The Greek term translated as "abide" or "remain" can also be translated "to stand firm, to persevere", or, to put it more colloquially, to "hang in there." The illustration of a vine coupled with Jesus' admonition to "abide" means Jesus is exhorting the disciples to hang tough, to stay firm, to persevere with Him, to keep the home fires burning, to do all that they do in loyalty, fidelity and love to Him, come what may. We are also told He gave His disciples a commandment, a new mandate, "Love one another as I have loved you." ("*Mandate*" comes from the Latin "*mandatum*," for those who don't know, this is where we get "*Maundy Thursday*").

In verses 9-10 Jesus says. "*As the father has loved Me, so have I loved you. Abide in My love. If you keep My commandments, you'll abide in My love.*" And one of His prime commands is that we love one another as He has loved us. That's how we best live, that's how we "abide," that's how we hang tough, that's how we stay firm and that's how we help each other stay firm ... by loving one another. It is good to be reminded of all this as we come to this family table this Communion Sunday. Jesus is the Vine. We are the branches. We draw our life and our love from Him, and He links us to each another. "*If you abide in Me, you will bear fruit.*" That's the

promise here, written over and over and over again. Abide, Abide, Abide. And as we abide, as we are connected to Him, rooted in Him, hanging tough with Him, staying connected with Him like branches on a vine, then God the Father becomes our loving Vinedresser and helps us to be a source of fruit, nourishment and blessing to ourselves and to others.

And like a good vinedresser, God goes to work pruning the branches so that the life-giving and love-producing and soul-nourishing force surging through that vine goes on to produce good things. Not a bunch of fluffy foliage, not a load of dead wood, not a crop of sour grapes, but *fruit* ... good, nourishing, productive fruit ... fruit like squash, turnips and lettuce. I know squash, turnips and lettuce are vegetables, so I'm mixing my metaphors, but I'm the pastor and I like that image!

First, Squash. Squash gossip, squash indifference, squash selfishness. If you are abiding in Jesus, then squash gossip! I like how someone once defined gossip as talking about things and/or spreading stories when you are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. Just squash it! Squash the urge to spread stories about people when you are neither part of the problem nor part of the solution. And squash criticism! I love a quote attributed to Thomas a Kempis (*a 15th century German priest who wrote that classic devotional, The Imitation of Christ*); "*Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be.*" Don't get critical when others are not what you want them to be when you can't even make yourself what you want to be! Squash it! We can get so critical of the perceived shortcomings of others while simultaneously being amazingly tolerant of our own shortcomings. Just squash it, and let's do our best to see the good in others and work with and foster and enjoy what is there. And nobody ... nobody ... is 100% perfect. I'm sure you've heard of the 80/20 rule? One dating and relationships consultant put it this way: "*If you don't know what the 80/20 rule is, you've already made your first mistake. We, as humans, are always looking for the next best thing because as we all know the grass is always greener on the other side, right? Wrong. This is what the 80/20 rule teaches you. Generally, when in a relationship you get about 80 percent of what you want. This sounds pretty good because it's such a high percentage. However, we are also craving that other 20 percent. We fight over it, break up over it and complain about it because as we already went over, we always want what we can't have.*"¹ And squash **indifference** ... squash the indifference that doesn't care about the feelings, hopes and concerns of others, but cares only about what I want, what I like, what I feel. Whenever I hear someone drone on and on about "I,I,I" I just want to say, "*Ai yi, yi! Squash it!*"

I'll just zip through the rest of the "garden" -- **Second, turnips!** Determine to turn up for church, and to turn up with a smile (*and sometimes that does take an act of the will!*). Also, determine to turn up to serve others, not just to be served! **Third, Lettuce.** Lettuce be faithful, let us be unselfish, and let us love one another!

God wants to produce good fruit ... *and* vegetables ... in our lives that will be a blessing to others as well as a blessing to ourselves. The more we actively abide, the more we love, the more we pour love into the lives of others and as they pour love into our lives, the more we stay connected and supportive and bound together by our connection to the true Vine Jesus Christ. And an added benefit is that the more we abide in Him, the more those things in our lives which are not good, the more those attitudes and habits which are wasting our lives and poisoning our lives (*and the lives of those around us*), those things just begin to be stripped away by the loving, pruning care of God. As we grow in grace, as God lovingly goes to work pruning us, we find this or that form of negative behavior we struggled with, we often find that one day it simply no longer has any attraction. The vices of an earlier time in our lives ... well, as we grow in the vine, they no longer seem appealing, and not because we are aging and/or are losing desire, but because we are growing in love and grace. The anger that used to flare so easily in our lives we find is being replaced by gracious patience and compassionate understanding of the shortcomings of others ... because the Vinedresser has been at work on us, clipping back those things in our lives which are neither helpful nor fruitful, removing the dead or rotting wood so that our lives can now bear even more fruit and be a source of refreshing nourishment to others. And by the way, as for those things which still may vex us ... patience. God the Vinedresser mercifully and tenderly prunes rather than amputates, which sometimes takes time ... but (a) be assured He is not done with any of us yet, and (b) trust that He loves to see us blossom and produce and grow and flourish with the effusive and full and redemptive force of His Son.

Now, to be sure, pruning sometimes hurts. Anytime a living thing is cut, it hurts. It hurts to be pruned, to be cut back, and we don't always understand at the time why life has to hurt. The point is not that God wants to hurt us. But He does want us to have the joy of bearing more fruit, and there is nothing that will make a branch bear more fruit better than pruning. And God the faithful vinedresser will continue to prune those whom He loves, that we might bear more fruit ... like squash, turnips and lettuce.

¹ For the complete article, see <https://swoon.theodysseyonline.com/80-20-rule-relationships>