

# A GARDEN DANCE

## Sermon, May 2, 2021

### Text: John 15:1-17; I John 4:13-21

Nine years ago I came across a little horticultural devotional that really moved me (*I've since lost the source, but I used it in a sermon then and one other time, so some of you may remember this ... I've since come across several varying versions while trying to track down the original, but I will stay with the one I have*). The 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 on the garden he would seed, plant and cultivate three rows of **squash** ... he would work to squash *gossip*, squash *criticism* and squash *indifference* in this 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 in the garden of his heart he would seed, plant and cultivate **lettuce**: Let us be faithful, let us be truthful ... and let us love one another.

I like that.

Jesus uses a horticultural metaphor in our Gospel reading today. He 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 English Standard Version translates it, the vinedresser. I chose the English Standard Version largely because (a) the choice of the English word "vinedresser" (*rather than the NIV's "gardener"*) consistently carries through with Jesus metaphor of Himself as the Vine, and (b) one other word, a word Jesus repeats over and over and over again (*intimating that it's kind of an important word*), is also translated differently in our NIV pew Bibles. The word as translated by the ESV is "abide." The NIV has "remain" rather than "abide;" I much prefer "abide." "Remain" sounds so static, so inactive, so much like, "Stay!" When I'm about to leave the house, that's what I might say to the dog (*or what I used to say to my dog; he passed away almost ten years ago*). "Sit! Stay! Don't DO anything."

"Abide" carries more of a connotation of *actively* living than the word "remain" (*or "stay"*). The Pharisees had lots of "stay" type commandments, lots of "don't be a bad dog" type commandments, lots of commandments concerning what we should NOT do; requirements which seemed to define "righteousness" essentially by what we *don't* do ... "don't do this, don't do that, and you'll be righteous" ... which is still how some may define "righteous." 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 am not a bad dog, I will be ... all right." 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 (*nor do we accomplish anything, but I'm getting ahead of myself a bit*). From there, it's also only a short step to thinking, "Everything wrong must be someone else's fault," because, well, I didn't do anything. With all due reverence, I think it might have driven Jesus nuts when people thought this way. He wants His disciples to DO, to LIVE, to RISK, to be ENGAGED, to be lovingly and actively PRODUCTIVE ... and to use a mixed metaphor inspired by the choir's excellent anthem which I eventually decided to "prune" back from the sermon (*hence the attached insert ... the sermon title was printed in the bulletins before I created the insert*) to keep in step, to enjoy the "dance" while abiding. In short, abide means to LIVE, and Jesus would have us live *well*. 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. Life becomes incredibly dull and unproductive when the essence of our 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. And 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"*). 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 stay faithful, that's how we keep in step and that's how we help each other stay faithful and keep in step ... by loving one another as He has loved us (*and just as a brief aside, it's about lovingly and patiently helping others keep in step; not being all too ready to kick them out of the dance circle or off the dance floor when they misstep*).

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, keeping in step with Him as the “Lord of the Dance,” staying connected with Him like branches on a vine, then God the Father becomes our loving Vinedresser and helps us to bear fruit, He helps us be a source of nourishment and blessing to ourselves and to others. Like a good vinedresser, God the gardener gently 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 fruit in our lives. Not a bunch of fluffy useless foliage, not a load of dead or rotting wood, not a bunch 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 (*again*), but I’m the pastor in this pulpit and I like that image!

**First, Squash.** *Squash gossip, squash indifference, squash selfishness.* If you are abiding in Jesus, trying to keep in step with, and follow the lead of, the Lord of the Dance, then squash gossip! Someone once defined gossip as spreading potentially detrimental and usually unverified information 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! A quote I posted on my desk at my first church job as a Christian Education Director thirty-seven years ago, and have posted it on every desk in every church office I’ve occupied since then, is from Thomas a Kempis, a 15<sup>th</sup> century German priest who wrote the classic devotional, The Imitation of Christ: “*Be not angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot (even) make yourself as you wish to be.*” Don’t be so quick to criticize others who are not as you think they should be when you can’t even make yourself what you want to be! Just squash it! We can get so critical of the perceived shortcomings of others while simultaneously being amazingly tolerant of our own shortcomings. SQUASH it, and let’s cultivate our level best to see the good in others and work with and foster and enjoy what is there. And nobody ... nobody ... is 100% perfect (*if they were, you probably wouldn’t like them anyway because then they’d be too perfect!*). One counseling guide describes the 80/20 rule: “*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: generally, when in a good relationship you get about 80 percent of what you want. This sounds great because it’s such a high percentage. However, we are also craving that other 20%. We fight over it, bicker over it, we even break up over it because we always want what we can’t have.*”<sup>1</sup> (And I would add, *we then lose that 80% in the process*) 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 (*now, I know that’s hard to do with masks on, but learn to smile with your eyes ... and more often than not your feelings will follow the “cue” of your facial expression*). Also, determine to turn up to serve others, not just to be served! **Third, Lettuce.** Lettuce be faithful, let us be truthful, let us love one another! God wants to produce in us good fruit ... and vegetables ... that will be a nourishing 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 via our connection to the true Vine Jesus Christ.

And one closing thought: 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 sapping our devotion and poisoning our lives (*and the lives of those around us*), those things just get stripped and snipped and clipped 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 suddenly seems to dissipate, we often find that one day it simply no longer has any attraction. The vices of an earlier time in our lives ... as we grow in the vine, such vices no longer seem so appealing, and not because we are aging and/or are losing desire, but because we are growing in love and grace. The anger and frustration that used to flare so easily in our lives we find being gently replaced by gracious patience and compassionate understanding toward others ... because the Vinedresser has been at work on us, clipping and trimming those attitudes and habits and things in our lives which are neither helpful nor productive, removing the rotting wood and leafy foliage and weedy roots so that our lives can bear GOOD fruit and be a source of refreshing nourishment to others.

And by the way, regarding those things which still may vex us ... patience. The Vinedresser mercifully and gently 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 grow and produce good fruit ... fruit like squash, turnips and lettuce.

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<sup>1</sup> For an article that has a version of the 80/20 rule, see <https://swoon.theodysseyonline.com/80-20-rule-relationships>

## ANTHEM STORY: "LORD OF THE DANCE"

*Insert excerpted/adapted from an April 23, 2017 sermon, "Risen Risus"*

The choir's anthem "Lord of the Dance," was written by Sydney Carter in 1963 to a tune used by that American religious "subsect" of the Quaker sect called the Shakers, *"Tis a Gift to be Simple."* It was actually meant to be a dance tune, for the Shakers liked to use dance in worship. First stanza lyrics: *"I danced in the morning when the world was begun, I danced in the moon and the stars and the sun. I came down from heaven and I danced on the earth; At Bethlehem I had My birth."* Chorus: *"Dance, then, wherever you may be; 'I am the Lord of the Dance,' said He, 'and I'll lead you all, wherever you may be, and I'll lead you all in the Dance, said He.'" Or, as I learned it in high school, "... I'll lead you all in a dance that's free!"*

C.S. Lewis would have loved this anthem. In his writings he liked to use the imagery of the "dance," especially in his Space Trilogy (*Out of the Silent Planet*, *Perelandra*, and *That Hideous Strength* ... he also used it in his most well known work, *Mere Christianity*). He pointed out that we tend to think of the universe as a grand mechanism, but in medieval literature the picture of the universe was much more festive. In the medieval mindset the orderly movements of the universe were conceived not so much as those of a machine, but rather as a dance, a festival. A machine is cold, mechanical, unfeeling. But a dance is festive, fun, exuberant, alive; people laugh at a dance. I've always enjoyed square dancing. A square dance is most enjoyable when everyone follows the caller's instructions and steps in time accordingly; one learns the steps and obeys the calls and the dance is festive, enjoyable, even exhilarating for all. The enjoyment of the dance loses its luster, though, when some clod insists on doing his own thing, doesn't follow the rules, or is otherwise out of step with the rest of the square. In the dance the order is part of the fun; following the rules, obeying the calls, and staying in step with the "Lord" or the "Caller" or the "Leader" of the Dance serves to enhance the enjoyment of the dance. Somewhere along the way in my unfortunate generation, the "rules" for dancing generally went out the window; the preeminent form of "dancing" since, oh, the sixties became this do-your-own-thing freestyle jiggling, flailing, gyrating and "footloosing" (and in a later devolvement called "break dancing") that's been the bane of many a self-conscious teenager and has really detracted from the beauty and harmony which once characterized the dance floor ... there just is no grace of order, harmony, and coordination in "fast dancing" with partners as there is in square or ballroom dance.

C.S. Lewis: *"The Dance is, in short, obedience itself; one attains freedom by submitting his or her own will to the design of the universe, moving in harmony and concord within it."* True freedom and full enjoyment of life is found from keeping in step with the godly design of how things are created to be. Jesus is the Lord of the Grand Dance. Human like us, divine like God ... He dances the dance of the Universe; He's the grand Caller and He invites us to join Him on the dance floor. He invites us to learn how to stay in step with the divine order that was meant to give us abundant life and exhilarating joy. As mentioned earlier, I learned the last phrase of the chorus when singing "Lord of the Dance" in my young adult years (and as I taught it here with my guitar in Vacation Bible School and one or two Easter Sunrise services, accompanied by a much younger version of our Director of Music; I think John was 8 or 9 at the time!) as "... I'll lead you all in a dance that's free." (or, to paraphrase John 8:32, "You shall know the Dance, and the Dance will set you free!"). Again, a dance is festive, fun, free-ing; people laugh at a dance. Joy is the serious business of this universe as created by a joyful and loving and living God!