

### “At Home on Vine Street”

You may remember that last week’s Gospel lesson was an agricultural metaphor about shepherding. This week Jesus presents us with another agricultural metaphor, one that many of us can relate to. Even if we do not grow grapes or tend vineyards we have minded gardens and the tasks Jesus uses in his metaphor relate to vineyards and gardens. Whether we are caring for a vegetable garden or a flower garden we about pruning out the dead and unproductive. Culling and pruning can seem tough. But we all know what comes of letting things grow willy-nilly. You get a tangle of growth with no produce or beauty to show for it. We know that to get the greatest yield from the garden sometimes we must be ruthless in our removal of stunted or unproductive branches as well as plants that are crowding out the ones that promise the best yield.

The way Jesus describes his Father as the vinegrower is rather cruel. I want to believe that God the Father is more forgiving and gentle than that. I want the Father to be like the shepherd who looks for the lost sheep, or the gardener who insists on fertilizing the unproductive olive tree for one more year instead of cutting it down as the owner wants. If I identify as one of the branches on the True Vine, I want to know that I have every chance in the world to prove that I can become productive branch bearing good and plentiful fruit. Jesus’ stories and parables usually give me hope that I am beloved, and that God will do all that is possible to help me fulfill my God-given potential. The vinegrower metaphor gives me a little chill.

Which of us can be truly sure that we are connected to the one True Vine? What is there in life that tells us that we have attached ourselves to that vine and not another. The vine we have chosen to be grafted onto may well provide us with worldly success, but we know full well that is not a true indicator of being part to the True Vine. Many of the most successful people in the world could not quote you one verse of sacred scripture or tell you one thing about how their relationship with God has influenced their life. They often do not even attempt to make a show of it. They go on their merry way without giving God, in any form, a second thought.

What then can we do regardless of our station in life, class, wealth, fame, or power to know that we are part of the True Vine. I think it comes down to one word that Jesus uses over and over again in this lesson. That word is “abide.”

Abide is an interesting word. In contemporary speech it is almost always used in the negative. Such as “I cannot abide that.” When I went to the Thesaurus I found the following synonyms for abide: accept, tolerate, bear, take or stomach. When I consulted the online dictionary the definition I encountered was “To put up with; tolerate: *synonym: endure.*”<sup>1</sup> These are not the understandings of abide that Jesus has in mind. Other definitions suggest the willingness to withstand something, patience in awaiting something, or to accept without objection. These do not seem to capture what Jesus means either. Another definition “to remain in place or in a fixed state” seems to get closer. What gets closest to Jesus’ meaning is one of the words abide is related to. Change just one letter and we get the word “abode.”

What comes to your mind when you hear the word “abode?” [listen for: a place where someone lives, a dwelling, fireside or hearth, dwelling, house, apartment, or home...] What comes to your mind when you think about home? [listen for family, security, safety, comfort, ease, rest, life, refuge, homerun...] Home is one of the most comforting and positive concepts in our culture. What sayings can you think of

concerning home [listen for: home is where the heart is, home cooking, home base, homing pigeon, hometown, home sweet home]. There are famous quotes about home as well, such as “There’s no place like home,” “E.T. Phone home,” and “Home is the nicest word there is.” (L. Frank Baum, Melissa Mathison, Laura Ingalls Wilder, respectively.)

When Jesus talks about us abiding with him as a branch on the True Vine he is talking about us making our home with and in him. Making our home with Jesus is very intimate. We are not on the outside looking in through a window, we are inside sharing the space with him. We have accepted his invitation to come live with him to make our abode with him. It is not just that we are to live with him, but he is to live with us. It is mutual. We are not just a house guest we are at home together. We are to abide in him just as he abides in us.

We are also to allow his word to abide in us. Accepting his teachings is a way for him to abide in us. When we can accept Jesus’ teachings and accept the invitation into his home we are abiding in him. We have made our abode with the most holy one. But we must be honest with ourselves. Are we really doing as Jesus taught and commanded or are we doing as we want to and bending Jesus’ teachings or ignoring them altogether. Am I really abiding in Jesus? It can be hard to discern. The world has one set of values and rewards which can delude even those with the best intentions. As St. Paul wrote, “I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” We are prone to act differently than we intend to. The only answer is to abide in Jesus.

That means to be in communication with him. Just as we communicate with those in our physical home, we have to be in communication with the one whom we abide with spiritually. Prayer is that means of communication. Prayer is not just petition of help for ourselves or others. It is not just the prayer of thanksgiving for the blessings we have received. It is not just the prayer of praise. It is also the prayer of silence.

A one-sided conversation is not a conversation at all. It is a monologue. We need to give Jesus space to answer. We must keep silent to give him the chance to respond. Oh, but that is hard. As much as we say that we crave silence it makes us uncomfortable and we try to fill it up. But for Jesus to respond we must give him the silence in which to do so. In that time, we are not listening for words per se, but opening our hearts to silence which is God’s first language.<sup>2</sup> As we do so we can become like a couple who know what the other is thinking without even having to speak a word. Of course, we always check in with our partner just as we must check in with Jesus to make sure we heard correctly.

Abiding in Jesus is not easy. It requires vigilance and constant communication unless we get distracted by worldly desires. But when we abide in Jesus, we know we are home. When we are home, we know how good that is, for truly there is no place like home in Jesus.