

“Pruning Vines and Bearing Fruit”  
Sermon Preached by David D. Colby  
Central Presbyterian Church  
May 14, 2006  
Scripture: John 15:1-11

I sometimes worry I will end up like a preacher British author Nick Hornby describes in his sharp, sarcastic novel How to be Good. The protagonist and her elementary-school age daughter Molly are going to church for the first time.

I thought [says the mother] that I could detect a touch of weariness [in the kindly middle-aged preacher], maybe even despair, during the appeal for flower arrangers, but maybe this is because flower arranging is not her thing.

Sermons, however, clearly are her thing – electrifyingly, embarrassingly, hilariously so. She takes a deep breath, fixes us with a stare, and then shouts “1-2-3-4 GET WITH THE WICKED!”, and we shrink back into our pews afraid and confused – all of us apart from Molly, who recognizes the reference . . . [to] her favorite song in the charts. [As for] the rest of the congregation . . . I would wager that none of them, as yet, have bought the CD, so they do not know why the nice lady is shouting these things at them, and those who are physically capable of doing so stare hard at their shoes.

“This is a good church, isn’t it, Mum?” Molly whispers. . . “Is this the one we’ll be coming back to every week?”<sup>1</sup>

Well, I did sing a little Sinatra in one of my first sermons here. But rest assured – no “1-2-3-4 GET WITH THE WICKED.” But I do want to share a hymn with you. In England in 1847, a different preacher, Henry Francis Lyte penned these words that would become one of our best-known hymns.

Abide with me: fast falls the eventide;  
The darkness deepens; Lord, with me abide!  
When other helpers fail, and comforts flee,  
Help of the helpless, O abide with me.

He wrote the hymn as he was preparing to leave his church upon doctor’s orders to fight the tuberculosis that would soon take his life. And as he was looking for some consolation, he drew back to the words we just heard, promises of Christ as he was preparing to leave the disciples.<sup>2</sup>

Abide in me as I abide in you . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:4,7,9)

Those are verses worth memorizing, those are verses worth underlining in your Bible at home. Those are verses worth singing yourself to sleep. Jesus seems to be anticipating his death, and trying to prepare the disciples for the life that lay ahead. So this promise is from Christ himself that he will abide with the disciples, that they will remain connected to his life-giving power, like fruit connected to a branch. Abide with me, he says. Abide with me.

I wish I could stop there. But there are two things in this passage that have I have been struggling with for days now, and maybe you will share these concerns. The first is just a little word - one little word appears twice that seems to make all the promises of Christ quite conditional. The word, of course, is “if.”

**If** you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you (John 15:7).

**If** you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love (John 15:10).

On this Mother’s Day, we give thanks for good mothers and honor the challenges that good parenting requires. Developmental psychologists tell us over and over that children growing up in this world need unconditional love. Children need to be able to trust that they are deeply loved by their parents – and, I might add, by their church. They need to know they are loved – no ifs, ands, or buts.

In our theological tradition, we have long held to two beliefs, not necessarily in this order. That left to our own devices, humans are a mess and will likely get things wrong. Second, despite our weaknesses and failings, we trust in the goodness of God, who loves us better than any human parent can love. Like the mother of The Runaway Bunny in the children’s time, Christians trust that God says to us, “If you run away, I will run after you.” Or, as the Psalmist says,

Where can I go from your spirit?  
Or where can I flee from your presence?  
If I ascend to heaven, you are there;  
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.  
If I take the wings of the morning  
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,  
even there your hand shall lead me,  
and your right hand shall hold me fast. (Psalm 139:7-10)

Despite the conditional nature of two of these sentences, our larger trust is in a God who will not fail us. We trust that God will love us like a loving parent – better than we can imagine.

But there is another part of the passage that has been problematic for me. Earlier this winter, I had to have two trees cut down. I liked these trees. They provided great shade for our non-airconditioned house in the summer, and I enjoyed watching squirrels scramble up the trunks immediately outside my windows. But down they had to go. There were several problems, which made the decision easy. They were planted too close to the foundation of the house, for one, and the trunk had hollowed out and was a disaster waiting to happen, said the tree

expert. So down they came. It was still a sad day for me – watching these living things get cut up and run through the chipper.

Call me sentimental, or (pardon the pun) sappy – but I don't like cutting things off and throwing them away. So these words of Jesus hit me hard. "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (John 15:6).

It feels violent, judgmental. "Thrown away like a branch," Jesus says, "thrown into the fire and burned." Maybe I need to get my trees out of my mind. After all, Jesus begins this metaphor not by saying I am the true tree that might just fall on your neighbor's house, but I am the true vine. The gospel of John reminds us several times of the connections Jesus felt to vines and grapes and wine. We need look no further than Jesus' first miracle in this gospel, when Jesus turned water into wine at a wedding. I know something about trees and their branches, but I really don't know much of anything about vines, or growing grapes.

So I called Nan Bailly, the master winemaker at Alexis Bailly Vineyards in Hastings. She said that they too are in the business of trying to turn water into wine. French winemakers have long held that in order to produce great wine, the grapevines must endure hardship. But most people thought Minnesota winters were just too much. Determined to prove that a good wine could come from Minnesota, Nan's father bought a 20 acre field in Hastings, Minnesota and enthusiastically adopted the motto, "Where the grapes can suffer."<sup>3</sup>

And the suffering Minnesota grapes must be doing something right, because the Alexis Bailly wines are gaining recognition. So Nan, the master winemaker must know something about growing good fruit, and healthy vines. I explained who I was, and stumbled around a little bit before cutting to the chase – tell me about pruning, I asked. I need to know why and when you would have to prune your vines.

I didn't know what to expect – maybe she would tell me "Oh yeah, big parts, branches of the vine die off occasionally and you have to prune it." Or, well sometimes parts of the vine become terribly sick and then we have to cut it off, what a shame when that happens." I didn't know. I just knew I was wrestling with this passage, "Tell me about pruning."

She didn't really hesitate after that. "Every year, we cut off sixty to eighty percent of the vine off. When it comes to wine, quality and quantity are inversely related. Pruning is really the only things humans can control about wine, the rest is up to nature."

That was helpful for me. It gave me a different way of seeing this passage, and maybe it helps you. My image went from that gruesome scene in the movie *Fargo*, where one of the criminals stuffs someone in a woodchipper, to a much more loving, peaceful image. God on his or her hands and knees in a garden in spring, like a rose gardeners pruning carefully, trying to bring out beauty and prize roses.

Spiritual Director Elaine Emeth says that the pruning metaphor . . . [makes her think] of God as a gardener who grieves while watching a violent storm rip through a prized garden.

Afterward, the gardener tenderly prunes the injured plants in order to guarantee survival and to restore beauty and harmony.<sup>4</sup>

God as the vine-grower, at work pruning back the vine every year so that the grapes may grow and bear good fruit. God as the gardener, tenderly pruning injured plants in order to guarantee survival and restore beauty and harmony.

And we all can take part in God's gardening work. I think of the elders and deacons, three of whom will be installed today. What is the work of church leadership if not preparing the soil, planting seeds, providing nurture and nutrients, and then lovingly pruning plants that will be beautiful and healthy.

On this Mother's Day, I think of how hard it is to be a parent. Unfortunately, we know that some parents have used pruning tools like hacksaws, chopping down egos, acting out of anger or addiction. Our world needs good parents, now more than ever. And we all need people in our lives who can take on the roles of mother-figures and father-figures as well as aunts and uncles and grandparents and surrogate relatives. The parental pruning we all need and want is like gardener God, pruning us with love and compassion – trying to help us discover what is unique and beautiful within us.

As I think about what the role this church can have in our lives, I think of this image. Together, we can prune and trim and shape a community bringing out the best in each other through honesty, and an exchange of our different cultures and worldviews and experiences. Together, we can prune and trim and shape a community where our passions for justice and peace and beauty can be made real. Together, we can prune and trim and shape a community where all are welcome and where all can be connected to the vine of God's love and energy. Together, we can prune and trim and shape a community filled with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control (Galatians 5: 22-23).

In good times and in bad, on sunny days and stormy days, when the grapes are suffering and when the fruit is blooming, we can trust that God's love is unfailing. Surrounding us, strengthening us, bearing us up, giving us love and courage and confidence.

And when that is not enough, when other helpers fail and comforts flee, then may those words of Jesus be realized.

Abide in me as I abide in you . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. . . As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. (John 15:4,7,9)

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<sup>1</sup> Nick Hornby, How to be Good (Riverhead Books, 2001) 234-35.

<sup>2</sup> This is from a website that provide hymn histories:  
[www.sermonaudio.com/hymn\\_details.asp?PID=abidewithme#history](http://www.sermonaudio.com/hymn_details.asp?PID=abidewithme#history)

<sup>3</sup> For more information, see [www.abvwines.com](http://www.abvwines.com)

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<sup>4</sup> Walter Wink, "Abiding – Even Under the Knife" Living the Word Column The Christian Century April 20, 1994  
found on [www.textweek.com](http://www.textweek.com)