

How important is the teaching of today's Gospel? Remember the when of this passage. Jesus had just washed the feet of his disciples, led them through a final meal, instituted the Lord's Supper, and now walked with them to the Garden of Gethsemane, where he will soon pray, and later be arrested. By the time the sun finds its way to mid-day, the very next day, Jesus will be on a cross. Jesus knew the timetable. He was using care with every word. But first a story:

Many years ago the Tiger Cats were closing in on another Grey Cup ---- I should point out that as we speak they haven't lost a game in over a year----- but in this game they just needed one point to clinch victory. The star running back broke free but in the excitement of the moment he spiked the ball on the one metre line. The play came to a grinding halt and the rest of the game with it. They had run out of time. The Tiger Cats had done everything well but they neglected to finish the job. Too often, I see this happen among us -----Christians and churches breakdown right on the goal line. I fear sometimes it's possible and I wonder what God must think when we neglect the source of our strength and power. When we fail to abide in Christ we render ourselves ineffective.

Since Easter morning, we have journeyed through gospels that examine who we are as disciples. How do we respond to a risen Messiah? How do we deal with both our doubt and our faith? How do we live as sheep of the good shepherd? And today, what does it mean to be connected to the true vine and what fruit do we bear? There are two ways to read this text.

The first is to focus on the branches. How do you and I become connected to the true vine? And once there, how do we summon up the capacity to bear much fruit --- And --- if we do not -- what then?

If you are like me, your eyes go first in this gospel to the dead branches that are gathered and burned in the fire. I am quick to wonder: Which branch am I? Am I the good branch that bears much fruit or am I the branch that bears no fruit and will soon be thrown into the fire? What sort of fruit does God require of me and how much is sufficient?

If we focus on our part in the gospel, we come to see ourselves as branches that must somehow jump up from the ground and find our way onto the vine. And then, once attached, we must find some way to pop out fruit. But in our urgency to focus on ourselves and to find our place in the gospel, we miss God's place in the gospel.

The first verse says, "I am the true vine and my Father is the winegrower." The center of this gospel is not we, it is God. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches, but God is the vineyard keeper. God is the one who grafts us to the vine. God is the one who cares for and prunes the branches. Jesus is the one whose roots connect us to the water of life. He is the source of our lives.

We do not jump to the vine; rather, we are placed there by the Father and tended there according to God's care. Do we have responsibility? Indeed we do. Jesus says, "Abide in me." The word abide is used 8 times in today's gospel. Jesus says, "Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Abide. It means to dwell, to live your days, remain in . . . rest in the love of God.

You and I are called to abide and dwell in Christ. To live as if it were not possible for distance or circumstance to separate us. For in Christ it cannot. The branch cannot bear fruit separated from the vine. Nor will a spindly branch survive if planted in the ground. It says, "Abide in me," over and over again. Abide in me. Live in me. Dwell in me. Trust in me and count on me, for all things. You will find your life — in me. Jesus says, "Abide in me, as I abide in you."

Yet abiding is no free ride.

This gospel is the only one which goes into great detail about what Jesus told His disciples during the last supper in the upper room. John 13-17 is called the Upper Room Discourse and is the most intimate and loving sermon of Christ in the Bible.

The branches that abide in the vine and bear much fruit will be pruned by the vine grower in order to bear more fruit. Pruning can be a painful process. If the pruning is not done, the bushes will not have the chance to bloom. God knows this. He knows what work must be done in us ---- what deadwood must be removed in us ---- if we are to live. We are branches on the vine. Grafted to the vine, we belong to him, and his love shall never leave us.

The cross is the final testament to that love. A love that bears joy and sorrow, exhaustion and ease, plenty and want. A love that goes beyond that, well beyond that... even to the grave, both his and ours, and beyond, to the salvation God has prepared for us all.