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St. Stephen's, Newport News VA

*Acts 8:26-40; Psalm 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8*

## ***Come, Abide, Go***

“I am the vine, you are the branches.” How often have we heard those words, sung those words, and nodded some sort of assent to the metaphor. But how often have we listened to what Jesus is telling us through this story—it is a very powerful message for our Christian lives. It sets things straight as to how we are to be and what we are to do. As the text says, “cut off from me you can do nothing.” So we are called not only to be branches, but productive ones at that!

Branches on grapevines do two things. First, they hold the leaves. The leaves are sun catchers. The sunlight caught is turned into food for the plant by the process we have named photosynthesis. After the leaf has done its work, then the food is moved by the branch into the vine. The vine uses that food to grow more leaves and eventually produce fruit.

Second, the branches hold the fruit while it grows. The branch feeds the fruit with the energy produced by the leaves and converted into food by the vine. In short, no branches, no leaves; no leaves, no food; no food, no fruit; no fruit, no life.

Jesus, in using this analogy of the vine and the branches, Jesus wants us to see our interdependence with him. We are completely dependent on Jesus for life. Jesus is completely depending on us to do his work in the world. The image employed in the text is, “It is to the glory of God that you should bear much fruit, and become my disciples.”

So for those of us who claim that we are Christians, the meaning is clear. The degree to which we are connected to Jesus is the degree to which we are alive.

Our baptismal covenant describes this connectedness in several ways. First, it tells what we are not. The first three questions asked of one being baptized are:

*(p. 302)*

- “Do you renounce Satan and all the spiritual forces of wickedness that rebel against God?”
- “Do you renounce the evil powers of this world which corrupt and destroy the creatures of God?”
- “Do you renounce all sinful desires that draw you from the love of God?”

This is a pruning of everything that keeps us from being what God wants us to be. This is the blight and the disease that withers branches and makes them unable to be fruitful. It means that we can be connected to Jesus because we have cut out the barriers to connectedness. We have sworn off the things that kill us.

The next three questions put us in a right relation with God. They connect us to Jesus.

- “Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Savior?”
  - . . . and you said, “I do, with God’s help.”
- “Do you put your whole trust in his grace and love?”
  - . . . and you said, “I do, with God’s help.”
- “Do you promise to follow and obey him as your Lord?”
  - . . . and again you said, “I do, with God’s help.”

These questions, having been thus answered create a branch of the vine written about in today's Gospel. All that remains is for "us branches" to go to work producing fruit.

Now, I can hear you thinking—what fruit? What does that mean to me? Well, let's take a look around the vineyard and see what we can see.

I'm looking at the results of a recent survey of unchurched Americans—perhaps the largest share of our neighbors. Let me share the highlights with you. First, the percentage of people claiming a church relationship decreases by generation: Over 55 years of age, 63 % claim church membership; 40-55—30%; 24-40 years of age—15%, and 18-24—7%.

What this means is that the visitors that walk through our doors are less and less likely to be Christians looking for a new church, and more and more likely to be "seekers" who are not yet sure what the Good News is, or if they want to be part of a church at all! If we want to grow fruit here in St. Stephen's vineyard, simply helping these folks feel at home in worship, leading them to and through the story of our faith as related to us in the Bible, and to find the ministry to which God may be calling them is a huge job!

As a start, we need to expect visitors—maybe putting on our nametags as we enter church rather than waiting for coffee hour might tell visitors that we welcome them and want to get to know them.

He is the vine and we are the branches. Jesus uses the symbol of the vine in an effort to express the relationship that exists between him and others. "Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Here, the metaphor is about incorporation; the incorporation of all of us in the Body of Christ. But who are the agents of this incorporation? We are. We must our commitment as disciples so that others are brought into the words of Jesus.

Have I not heard somewhere the words, “To know Christ and Make Him known”?

In turn, Jesus’ repeated message to us is: “*Come. Abide. Go.*”

We all have experience in the ***Come*** part. Somehow all of us here got here some way. Perhaps you can reflect upon how that happened, what that felt like, and how you can share that experience with others.

The ***Abide*** part is at once the easy and the difficult aspect of Jesus invitation. Abiding in Christ’s love and the warmth of his church . . . the fellowship of believers and the sense of belonging is the easy part. The hard part is, that for a Christian, ***Abiding*** can become an addictive state which can immobilize us, and cause us to ignore the ***Go*** part of Christ’s call to us.

***Go.*** Go forth into the world and make disciples of all nations. Our welcoming discipleship cannot begin only inside the doors of our church; it must extend into our lives away from here as well. According to the survey of the unchurched, 94% of the respondents said they would visit a church if someone invited them. How often do we shy away from inviting someone to go to church or a church function simply because we think they will say no, or we are simply too embarrassed to ask? Such a fear runs pale alongside the life-endangering discipleship of the likes of Paul and Peter and Stephen.

The sad part of the survey is that only 14% of those surveyed could ever remember having being asked!

But it is more than in being asked. For many—and if the survey is accurate—for many more than we realize—their first encounter with Jesus Christ is you! And what will that look like? I have always loved Lloyd Ogilvie’s response to what constitutes effective evangelism in the church. He wrote that the most powerful witness to Christ was “to live a life that demands explanation.” To live a

life that demands explanation—invites you to tell others why . . . and how . . . and whom.

It was not only of those first disciples alone that Jesus addresses verse 16 of today's Gospel—"You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should bear fruit."

"You are the branches," and it is through them that the vine bears. We are the body of Christ—his feet that must move for him. His hands that must carry for him. His body through which his will gets itself done. Can we listen? Can we hear him speaking to us?

*"Come, help me in this saving of the world! You have it in you; and I need you to do what needs to be done, so: Come! Abide! Go!"*— go forth, in the name of Jesus, and bear some fruit.

***AMEN***