

“Dwelling on It”
John 15:1-8

In honor of Mother’s Day I would like to begin with a poem about mothers by the poet Shel Silverstein:

God gave us fingers –Ma says, “Use your fork.”
God gave us voices –Ma says, “Don’t scream.”
Ma says eat broccoli, cereal and carrots.
But God gave us tasteys for maple ice cream.

God gave us fingers –Ma says, “Use your hanky.”
God gave us puddles –Ma says, “Don’t splash.”
Ma says, “Be quiet, your father is sleeping.”
But God gave us garbage can covers to crash.

God gave us fingers –Ma says, “Put your gloves on.”
God gave us raindrops –Ma says, “Don’t get wet.”
Ma says be careful, and don’t get too near to
Those strange lovely dogs that God gave us to pet.

God gave us fingers –Ma says, “Go wash ‘em.”
But God gave us coal bins and nice dirty bodies.
And I ain’t too smart, but there’s one thing for certain-
Either Ma’s wrong or else God is.

As we celebrate Mother’s Day today, we are reminded of the importance of our sense of belonging. Even though some of us may not have had good or healthy connection with our mothers, we are keenly aware of the value and importance of a mother’s love in our lives. Even as adults, much of what we do and the way we react in life have been defined by our relationships with our parents and family of origin. In fact the first year of our existence on earth can define forever our sense of trust and love in the world. If a baby’s basic needs are met and that baby receives enough love and nurture in their first year of life, they will have a deep sense of trust in being okay in the world. So, we are born with an innate sense of connection.

Today’s scripture invites us to recognize another source of connection that we have in our lives. This is our connection to the divine, to God. This is the source of love in our lives and in our world. In the Gospel of John in the chapter we read this morning from John 15, we have a beautiful image of deep connection. It is the image of vine and how it is deeply connected to the branches. Even to those of us who don’t much about vineyards, we can see in looking closely at the vine the many entwined branches, winding their way around one another in intricate patterns of tight curls that make it impossible to tell where one branch starts or another one ends. This is not just intricate; it’s intimate, and the vine shares with its branches the nutrients that sustain it, the life force of the whole plant. Even closer than the shepherd there on the hillside, this vine is one with the branches.

Yet, there is more to this image than just the natural connection. To the people who would have heard it first and the people whom the Gospel of John was addressing, the image of the vine is used over 200 times in the Old Testament. It was an image that described the people of Israel even as they failed in their connection with God. In Isaiah 5:1-7, Israel is likened to a formerly

productive vineyard planted and tended by Yahweh. Such loving care should have meant that this vineyard would bring forth choice grapes. Jeremiah 2:21 states that Israel, planted by God as God's vineyard, has become degenerate. Ezekiel 19:10-14 laments a great vineyard ("Mother Israel") that is "plucked up" and "cast down", and thus destroyed. And Hosea 10:11 depicts Israel as an empty vine that brings forth fruit that only benefits itself, and not God nor the world. In each case, Israel "the vine" of God, demonstrates that it has become an unproductive vine, and is thus rejected by God. They felt that their connection to God was broken in many ways.

So, when the Gospel of John presents Jesus as the true vine, we can see a renewal in the vision for the connection between the people and God. This is especially important to the community of faith that the Gospel of John was addressing as they were being cut off from the Jewish community. This was a message for them to know that what was essential to their faith was not their connection to God through the vine of Israel but to God through Christ as their true vine. The Greek word *meno* -- translated "abide" in our text, but it also carries meanings of "remain, stay; live, dwell; last, endure, continue." This word appears over 40 times in John's Gospel, 11 of which are found in this chapter. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit if it is disconnected from the vine, neither can disciples bear fruit if they are disconnected from Jesus. Early in the Gospel, when Jesus asks the disciples, "What do you seek," they counter with "Where are you staying?" and then stay with him. People brought to Jesus by the Samaritan woman "remain" with Jesus two days. Discipleship in John begins with brief "abiding" with Jesus, walks the walk of his life and culminates in the symbol of the branches abiding in the vine.

This is the invitation for us today, to dwell on the presence of God in Christ. We are invited most of all to stay connected with what nourishes us, what gives us life knowing that is what makes us bear fruit in life. This is not just a one-time event in our lives, when we join the church or go through confirmation or when we experience God in a real way. This abiding or dwelling on the Spirit of Christ is something that has to happen every day of our lives. It is a continual process of relationship. The result of this kind of support and relationship is bearing much fruit in our lives.

Yet, bearing fruit as referred to in our scriptures needs some explanation. To "bear fruit" was a common Old Testament term to speak of a community's faithfulness or obedience to God. Thus, Psalm 1:3 tells us that those who take delight in the Law and are faithful in obedience to it are those who are "like trees planted by streams of water which bear their fruit in its season". "To bear fruit," meant to the Jew of Jesus' day that one was living out in his or her own life the covenant made between Israel and Yahweh "to do justice, to love each other with forgiving love and to walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8). One's "fruit" or actions was proof positive that one was being faithful to the shalom vision for one's society that manifested itself in justice, equitable distribution of wealth and oneness with God.

So, how are we being the branches of the true vine today? How are we dwelling on the Spirit of Christ within and among us? I think the key to this kind of continual relationship with the Spirit is the awareness that we are the branches and that we belong to God. We are never cut off from our source of nourishment. Yet, we sometimes forget. We need daily reminders and practices of trust no matter what they are. The story is told about a time when the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted. Later, when the disciple, the celebrated Magid of

Mezeritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer,' and again the miracle would be accomplished. Still later, Rabbi Moseh-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: 'I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, Bu I know the place and this must be sufficient.' It was sufficient and the miracle was accomplished. Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.' And it was sufficient.

Our prayers don't have to be great or powerful. We may not even know sometimes that we are praying, but the key to all prayer is our sense of connection that is the abiding in Christ. This is what carries us through the ups and downs of life. This is the thread that runs through our lives. This is the blood that runs through our veins. In the Christian community we are dwelling together in the presence of God in Christ. This is the purpose of our life together. We are here to support each other so that we can continue to be aware of our connectedness to Christ so that we may be able to bear fruit of justice and peace in our world. Dwelling on the Spirit and love of God is hard for most of us because we often act as if we are separate from God and from others. We even sometimes act as if we need to control every little thing in our lives. Abiding and dwelling don't come naturally for most of us. Such actions seem so passive, so weak and even not productive. Yet, this is the invitation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. This is what truly ends up making a tremendous difference in our lives.

In his book *In the House of the Lord*, Henri Nouwen ends with a prayer. It is the prayer of Etty Hillesum, a Dutch Jewish woman who actually ended up dying in Auschwitz in November of 1943. This prayer was written during the height of the Nazi's persecution of the Jews in Holland:

"Dear God, Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me. I shall promise you one thing, God, just one very small thing: I shall never burden my today with cares about my tomorrow, although that takes some practice. Each day is sufficient unto itself. I shall try to help you, God, to stop my strength ebbing away, though I cannot vouch for it in advance.... All that really matters is that we safeguard that little piece of you, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well. Alas, there doesn't seem to be much you yourself can do about our circumstances, about our lives. Neither do I hold you responsible ... but we must...defend your dwelling place inside us to the last. There are, it is true, some who, even at this late stage, are putting their vacuum cleaners and silver forks and spoons in safe keeping instead of guarding you dear God. ..." May we always know this kind of dwelling in the Spirit! Amen.