

Easter 5B, Saint John's Olney MD, 29 April 2018  
The Reverend Henry P. McQueen  
Acts 8:26-40; Ps 22:24-30; 1 John 4:7-21; John 15:1-8

S.D.G.

*“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. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”*

For Christians these are comforting words, for much of modern society this is a perplexing challenge. After all, we don't abide in others, pull ourselves up by our own bootstraps. Some even believe that phrase, to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, is in the Bible - it is not.

If you even consider the image and the actions needed to pull yourself up by your own bootstraps, if you exert any sort of effort, you are likely to fall on the ground, and fall quite hard. But that is not the image I wish to focus upon.

*“Abide in me as I abide in you... Those who abide in me and I in them will bear much fruit.”* That counter cultural image is powerful, and perhaps challenging to envision. That interdependence is challenging to accept, and challenging to see ourselves as a part of: we have few models within our culture that demonstrate that interrelationship.

Sports teams may boast of the team effort that led to a victory, but ultimately we celebrate the individual, the winning pitcher, the quarterback, the pass receiver, the soccer player who managed a hat trick. None won the game alone, but the individual is still the star. It is impossible to win an event like the Tour de France without a strong team, but it is the individual who wears the yellow jersey and is celebrated on the Champs-Élysées.

Being a part of something bigger than ourselves, and existing because of the greater whole is uncommon in Western culture. A unique example of this can be found with the Tarahumara (tara-oo-mara) Indians of Mexico.

A number of years ago, on the leading edge of barefoot running, the book *Born to Run* was published. The author, Christopher McDougall, had been a runner up to the point when his doctor said he could never run again. The medical advice did not sit well with him and he kept wondering why running created pain, why human kind who had been running since we stood upright now found running a problem. Then he learned of a

reclusive tribe of runners, the Tarahumara Indians, in Mexico's Copper Canyons. This tribe did not just run, they ran barefoot, and they ran 100 miles without rest just for fun!

We are familiar with running races, the trio of Boston, Paris, and London marathons has just been held. Everyone lines up, the gun goes off. Then someone crosses the line breaking the ribbon with their chest, there is a winner.

Only the Tarahumara Indians do not do this. They run on mountain trails that barely seem to be marked. They survive the race on a mixture of water and chia seeds. And when two villages race each other it might be 100s of miles long over a period of several days, they race an equivalent distance of DC to Atlanta, without a break. At the end of the race it is not the first person across the line who wins. At the end of the race, everyone crosses the line together. The faster runners pace the slower runners, they all work together, they all finish together.

Following the race, the villages gather for a party. There is plenty of food and drink and dancing for the celebration. It is not a celebration of winners and consolation for the losers, it is a celebration of running together.

African culture, across all the regions, has a sense of community that is similar to this. It is the primordial principle of "I-am-because-we-are"; it is the principle of Ubuntu. While many view the origins of Ubuntu as from South Africa, it is a belief that permeates much of the African continent. It is an expression of living in a connectedness of one; "I am because we are."

There is no living in isolation, my being is because of who we are together. "I am the vine, you are the branches." This is the oneness that Jesus invites us into.

I am running this race because we are running this race

I am Christian because we are Christian

This sense of community that can be witnessed among the African countries, or the Tarahumara Indians, is not a sense of community that the Western world shares, or even understands.

We know how to run the race. We run to get our ribbon, our wreath, our prize. We compete to get into a good school. We compete to get a good job, a promotion, a raise. We understand competition, we understand running the rat race. We understand someone winning and someone losing.

Running the way the Tarahumara Indians run, so that everyone finishes together, we don't get that; but Jesus calls us to live that life. The vine is strongest when each branch is strong. We lift ourselves up when we lift each other up.

We can't bare fruit with out the vine; the vine loses strength without us. We can do nothing apart from God. All that we are, all that we have, all that we do comes from God. But the relationship is more than that, the branches on the vine help each other to grow and blossom.

There is a core of 6-8 individuals in the parish who are leading our efforts to furnish apartments for refugees when they arrive in this area. But Our Neighbor's Home ministry would not exist without the contributions of each of us, it would not exist without the International Rescue Committee, it would not exist without the refugees. Every person along the path that led the refugees to become our neighbor is a part of the ministry and the effort. Every branch makes the vine stronger.

This is not the first nor will it be the last time that we explore the topic of Ubuntu and immerse ourselves in the sense of – I am because we are. The examples of this within scripture are plentiful. This is the way we have been called to live. Our actions, for better or for worse, affect each other; each branch affects the other branches and each branch affects the vine.

If we try to describe the vine our explanation will depend upon our point of reference. If we focus on our beautiful altar windows our description will depend upon physical attributes; color, texture, abundance of fruits and flowers. If we turn to the writings of our beloved John our description will simply be – love. Saint John writes "Abide in me as I abide in you... Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit". He also writes "God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them." God is the vine, and God is love; the vine is love.

Only through a deep abiding love can the villagers of the Tarahumara Indians run as though they are one. Only through a deep abiding love can we proclaim I am because we are.

This is the way, the truth, and the life. *Abide in me as I abide in you.*

Amen,