

John 15: 1-8 "Abide in Me" Rev. Janet Chapman 7/28/19

I think my peach tree has a vendetta against me. It is an Elberta peach which means they are some of the juiciest, sweetest peaches ever but when that tree decides to ripen, there is only about a 2 week window to harvest every last peach before they drop to the ground and become fodder for the ants, deer, and possum. Much to my chagrin, that 2 week window came right before I left for General Assembly, and while I was away I had to leave it to whomever could come and retrieve its delicate fruits. Now that limited window is closing as I watch those last peaches at the top of the tree taunt me, hanging on for dear life, as I shake their branches, as I ascend the ladder and maneuver my long-poled peach picker trying to dislodge them from their perch before they tumble worthlessly to the hard ground. Often these are the best peaches of the tree because they grow closest to the central trunk. Understandably, that is where the nutrients are the most concentrated. For those who grow grapes, I am told that is why rambling branches are pruned from the grapevine, so they don't take away from the central vine which nourishes the fruit. They are pruned and kept short to produce the heartiest fruit.

Jesus takes this metaphor from nature, being the great agriculturalist that he was, to point to the inter-connected relationship between God, Jesus, and us. Jesus self-identifies in images that are familiar to his followers and that hold theological meaning: bread, light, door, shepherd, and even vine. These forms of self-identification all point to the relationships that exist between God, Jesus, and each other. While at the Assembly, I was taught a new form of self-identification. Within each workshop, each session I attended, we were asked to give our name and what personal pronouns we used to identify ourselves. There were even buttons people wore asking "How do you identify yourself?" Do you identify yourself as she/her/hers,

he/him/his, or they/theirs/them? It was most prevalent at the LGBTQ plus dinner as various folks along the spectrum were present. In other words, I would introduce myself as “Hi, my name is Janet and I use the pronouns she/her/hers.” I also learned that the LGBTQ community has now added the word “plus” to the end of the group’s name in order to recognize that even the acronym LGBTQ does not cover the wide array of self-identifications being proclaimed these days. A total of 30 new Disciples of Christ congregations joined ours this year in being officially named as Open and Affirming by the denomination bringing the total to over 200. Each of them are seeking to put into action John’s words from our text today, “Abide with me,” which was the theme of this year’s national gathering.

The Greek root for “abide” carries a range of meanings including to “stay in place,” “enduring,” “holding out,” all of which imply the steadfastness and reliability of God’s presence in and for the community. God’s care as the Vinegrower, as the Arborist, is constant and beneficial. Whatever pain or suffering that occurs in the growing process is redemptive and restorative rather than arbitrary and vengeful. Whenever God is doing the maintenance in our lives, we can be assured that new growth and new life will be the result. Any of us who have spent any time in a garden know the benefit of deadheading flowers to bring more abundant blooms, of pruning those useless branches away so that the main branches, that life-sustaining Vine, can grow stronger fruit. In a world of cell phones, we are given a whole new image in that infamous phrase, “Can you hear me now?” Whenever there is a poor signal, a bad connection, we have to hang up and try again. It always happens to me as I’m driving north on I-5 and hit the Pine Grove exit – I don’t know what it is about that particular spot but I consistently am shouting through my Bluetooth “Can you hear me now?” When we finally get that good

connection, our relief springs forth from something greater than the mechanics and electronics of sound. It has something to do with our human need to be connected to one another, to be in relationship with each other, communicating and understanding one another. Jesus points to this in identifying himself as the Vine speaking to the fruit, you and I, saying “Apart from me, you can do nothing.” Act in ways that keep the connection strong – abide in me as I abide in you so you can hear me more clearly, so we can keep the relationship strong and connected. In those days when you can’t wait for your lunch break, your coffee break, consider taking a prayer break as well. Remind yourself of those well-proven words, “There is nothing that is going to happen today that you and God can’t handle together.”

In the rain forests of Central Africa live the Mbuti Pygmies, a tribe that still hunts and gathers, while nurturing their children in such a way as to build strong connections between one another. “From the moment of birth onwards, everything is done to enable that sense of security (and connection) to be transferred in steadily widening and inclusive circles...(it begins) in the sphere that is limited to the mother’s body (and then moves) to the leaf hut, to the playground, to the camp, and finally to the most inclusive sphere of all, the forest. The result is that the Mbuti Pygmies are among the least violent people in the world. (Colin Turnbull)

Secure and stable connections breed secure and stable offspring. It seems obvious, doesn’t it? So why is it so hard for us to live accordingly?

There is a wonderful parable by John Aurelio called “It’s a Strange World” which begins with a kindergarten teacher sending her class off for summer break telling them to go out into the world and learn from the wisdom they have gained. One child asked, “What am I supposed to do?” She said, “Keep your eyes open and observe.” So off the child went with eyes wide

open. They looked and looked and were amazed at the strangeness of the world they lived in. People were the most interesting of all. They noticed all kinds of people: square people, big round people, tall, skinny people; red people, blue people, purple people, even green people. There were those who changed size, shape, and color; some could fade in and out. However, they were confused by people who would point to themselves and cry and people who would point to others and laugh. When they had seen their fill, they went back to the teacher and asked why people were like that? "It's a strange world," said the teacher. "Go back and this time notice what the people are doing." So they did. They noticed that the square people ate wheat chex and waffles and the round people ate cheerios and hamburgers and the straight, skinny people ate string beans and spaghetti. "This is funny," they thought, as they watched blue people eat blueberries, red people eat strawberries, purple people eat grapes, and green people eat broccoli. They went back and told all this to the teacher. "What about the others?" she asked. The child said, "I noticed that the people who kept disappearing ate nothing but ice cubes. When I watched those who kept changing, they kept eating different things. But the oddest of all were the people who pointed to themselves and cried, and pointed to others and laughed." "What did they eat?" asked the teacher. "Alphabet soup," they answered. "But the ones who pointed to themselves only ate the letter 'I's' and those who pointed to others only ate the 'U's.'" The teacher sat back and smiled. "So what did you learn about the world this summer?" "I learned that people are what they eat. Is that always so?" "That is always so," replied the teacher. "It's a strange world," thought the child.

Jesus tells the disciples to abide in him, as he abides in them. Eugene Peterson translates it, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." In other words, be

intentional about where your source of life and nourishment comes from, for we become what we ingest into our mind and spirit. Be intentional about the fruit you become that it may improve the lives of the poor and rejected, the oppressed and ostracized, those with whom Jesus directed us to throughout his ministry. It is a strange world as it occurs to me that maybe, just maybe those last few peaches who are clinging in the upper ranges of my tree still have a lesson to teach. Hug tightly to that central trunk and its core branches in order to grow and ripen to our fullest potential. Keep the connection strong not just for our own good, but for the abundance of what is to come, in order that all might discover the bounty of living ever closer to the Gardener of us all. Thanks be to God.