

"ABIDE IN ME"
April 28, 1991

TEXT: John 15:4 "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."

Craig Watts, my uncle's pastor in Southern Illinois, once told about a man who was visiting a small farm. While there, he noticed a pile of rather ordinary looking sticks. He thought it might be some kind of refuse pile, but the farmer set him straight. He explained that those "sticks" were branches which would soon be grafted onto fruit trees. And, in a few years, they would bear a new and improved kind of apple. They just had to be attached to a source of living energy.

Watts writes that it is the same way with people. We, too, "need to be rightly connected, grafted so to speak, in order to receive the sustenance we need for life that is life indeed." In each of us are possibilities which can be realized only if connected to a power which can bring out their potential.

That is what Jesus was saying in this morning's scripture: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." (John 15:4) Those words he spoke immediately after his last supper with the disciples. The closing words of the preceding chapter seem to suggest that they rose from the table and left the room.

If so, then it is quite possible that Jesus' comments were spoken on the way to Gethsemane. It was almost a mile from the house of the Last Supper --down the stair street, past the fountain of Siloam, out the water gate, and up the valley of the Kidron to Gethsemane. Along the way, they walked past numerous gardens just when, according to custom, grape vines were pruned.

It does not take much imagination for us to see Jesus and his followers walking down that street past the withering branches. Or to see Jesus look up at the vines from which the branches had been cut, and using what he saw to teach his unforgettable lesson: "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me. . . . If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. [But] if you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you will, and it shall be done for you." (John 15:6-7)

The truth in those words is basically the same as that taught in the Last Supper. Both impress on us the importance of a living union with Christ. He in us and we in him. But, where the Bread suggests nourishment, the Vine speaks of fruitfulness. We are urged to abide in Christ, not that we may eat of the vine but that we, ourselves, may be fruitful.

We come not only because of what Christ can do for us, but because of what he can do through us. Not merely because we are hungry and thirsty, but because, without his sustaining spirit, our lives are barren and fruitless. Because only as we abide in him can we hope to accomplish anything really worth while.

Certainly that was the experience of the early church. They did not just believe in Christ, whatever that means. They had a living relationship with him. Consider St Paul, for instance. He established and nurtured churches throughout Asia Minor. Then he crossed into Macedonia, and brought Christianity to the continent of Europe.

In the process, his strength was tested beyond mere human limits. Again and again he was beaten within an inch of his life. Once he was stoned and left for dead. Three times he was shipwrecked. As he, himself, put it, he labored "in toil and hardship, through many a sleepless night, in hunger and thirst, often without food, in cold and exposure." (II Corinthians 11:27)

How do you think he managed to do all that? Was he some kind of super-hero? Not in his own eyes! He explained it this way. "I have been crucified with Christ; it is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me; and the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." (Galatians 2: 20) Or, as Jesus said, "He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." (John 15:5)

Admittedly, Jesus engaged in a bit of hyperbole there. There is much that you and I can do by ourselves. Everyday we see ourselves and others around us accomplishing wonderful things on our own. For God created us with substantial powers. But those powers were never meant to be employed apart from God. Certainly not for long.

A good bit of this sermon, for example, was written on my lap-top computer. Although it is two years old now, and no longer state of the art, it is still a wonderful tool. It is IBM compatible, with 640 KB of RAM, a twenty MB hard-disk. If that sounds like gobbledygook, it just means that it has plenty of working space and lots of storage. It also has the latest word-processing software. It can check my spelling, my grammar, and even tell me what level of education it takes to understand what I have written. And I can use it anywhere because it works on battery as well as house current.

But it has its limitations. With everything running, the battery lasts only about an hour and forty-five minutes. Then, without warning, the computer just goes dead. Before I can use it again, I have to plug it in to a power source --either to run it on house current or to recharge the battery. I can make it last a little longer if I turn off the hard disk and the back-lighting on the screen display. But, even then, it soon runs out of power.

And so do we! We, too, can do marvelous things. You have probably heard that a computer which could do everything the human brain can do would fill a good size room, even in these days of miniaturization. But, like my lap-top, we were never meant to function for long away from our power source. We were designed by our creator for a continuing fellowship with Him. The things we do, the talents we have, the goals we achieve are all short-lived apart from the power which sustains us.

To be what we were meant to be, to know the life we were meant to live, we need to abide in Christ. To remain attentive --and responsive-- to his teachings and example. To draw life from him who is most directly connected to our ultimate source of power.

There is an old story about three ministers who were out fishing. One was an old retired minister. One was a middle-aged veteran. And one was a "rookie" just out of seminary. They had not been out long when the retired minister announced that he had left his favorite lure in the car. He got out of the boat, walked across the water to the shore, and got the lure. Then he walked back across the water and took his place once more in the boat. Soon the middle-aged minister noticed he had forgotten his suntan lotion. He, too, got out of the boat, walked across the water, got what he needed, and returned.

The "rookie" thought to himself, "My faith is as strong as theirs," and, making some excuse, he got out of the boat and immediately sank like a stone to the bottom of the lake. His friends pulled him out, but after a while he tried again. Once more he made some excuse, got out of the boat, and again sank to the bottom. As his friends pulled him out of the water the second time, one of them said to the other, "We had better show him where that ledge is before he kills himself."

For centuries, men learned a trade by apprenticing themselves to a master craftsman. And again today there is much talk about mentors and mentoring. Jesus Christ is the Master Craftsman of life, the Mentor of all mentors. He knows where the ledge is.

It may be that some of us can reach out and touch God directly --at least part of the time. But historically those who have known and served God best, have accepted Christ's offer to take His yoke upon them and learn through Him. If spiritual giants like Peter, and Paul, and Augustine, and Francis, and

Luther, and Calvin found their direction and strength through contact with Christ, it stands to reason that we might well do the same?

"Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me."