

Year B Easter 5 “A Together Thing” John 15 vv1 to 8

You can be sure that when things are repeated in scripture, they’re important.

Today, in this short Gospel story, we hear about bearing fruit six times and we hear the word “abide” eight times. So, when you’re playing a bible drinking game at your next party – when you take a drink every time you hear a certain word – make sure your word is not “abide” if you’re reading anything written by John. I’m kidding, of course: that was the “Don’t try this at home” section of the sermon. In all seriousness, bearing fruit and abiding in Jesus are the important message from John today and they are very much connected. Let’s explore how they’re connected and what that means for us.

One year, long ago, at the famous Tournament of Roses parade – known today as the Rose Bowl Parade – one stunningly beautiful float, the entry by the Standard Oil Company, which became Chevron, took everyone’s breath away. The “oohs” and the “aahs” turned to confused silence and then to laughter as the large float, the entry of an oil company, ran out of gas and sputtered to a halt, stopping the rest of the parade behind it as well. The company had not made use of its vast resources and found itself “dead in the water” so to speak.

This is a valuable lesson for us as Christians too. I know it’s not possible for the whole of God’s kingdom to be held up while the Lay Reader runs out for a jerry can of Good News but sometimes it does feel like some churches are “dead in the water”: tired, floundering without clear direction, dwindling in numbers, closing their doors. That’s when the churches who are getting it right need to set the example for other churches to join in because “getting it right” brings energy and enthusiasm, it brings passion and people experiencing deep joy and hope. “Getting

it right” means knowing where you’re going, asking God how to get there, and that is only possible through abiding with God. God is our vast resource.

John – who last week gave us the wonderful image of being both shepherd and sheep, working with Jesus to bring the whole world together into one flock with the one Good Shepherd – today gives us another vibrant image of wholeness and unity: Jesus is the true vine and we are the branches – so closely connected that we are actually one living entity...one flock, one living being, one body. The goal is unmistakable – we are to be one as Jesus and the Father are one, abiding in him as he abides in us.

How do we do that? How do we attain such oneness that we are living in God, allowing God to live in us, and doing it together as one being like branches connected to a vine? We do it through love. In John, to “abide” is code for “love”. Love God. Love neighbour. Love planet. And love as God loves – in abundance and with compassion and mercy, remembering that God’s love is action, not feelings and attractions. Loving someone as God loves doesn’t mean you approve of this person or respect and admire this person. Showing God’s love is a lot tougher than it sounds. It means living the good news that God’s kingdom is here, revealing the kingdom to others by living according to God’s ways, and inviting them into the kingdom life with us. To do this, is to bear the fruit that Jesus speaks of. So, abiding in God, and God in us means to love as God loves. When we love as God loves we are bearing fruit.

Jesus tells us quite a bit about bearing fruit today. Let’s start where Jesus starts. He is the true vine, he says. And God the Father is the vinegrower. Israel was often spoken of as a grapevine, tended by God. As imperfect humans, though, they were

not being the vine they were meant to be and so, Jesus came among them – the perfect representative on behalf of all Israel to be the vine tended by the Father.

It won't surprise you to learn that the people who tend grapevines – vinedressers, as they're called – are extremely well acquainted with their vines. The vinedresser knows all about their vines – what they need, when they need it, and the vines stay with the vinedresser for decades. Jesus starts talking right away about two different kinds of branches attached to the vine: those that bear fruit and those that do not. Before you start to think that this must be believers and non-believers, did you notice who gets mentioned first? Jesus. Jesus undergoes pruning by the Father. "He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit," Jesus explains. "Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit." Jesus gets tended by the Father. Did that make you stop and think? Jesus? Why on earth would Jesus need tending? He's God. He's perfect, isn't he? I quickly realized that we must always remember that Jesus is fully God – but, also, fully human. The key difference is that, although a human like us, Jesus had a perfect relationship with God. He completely and utterly put all his trust and reliance on God. He showed us faith because that's what faith is. Faith is not simply believing with your mind that Jesus is the Son of God, that God exists and is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Faith means trust and reliance on God.

Despite the fact that we are connected with God through the mystery of baptism, we absolutely still need the loving care of the vinedresser, the Father, to help us bear fruit – to love as God loves. We are attached, Jesus points out, but each of us has within us branches that bear fruit and those that do not. What God does with those unfruitful branches sounds a bit violent. Removing branches requires cutting, which sounds a little painful. And the unfruitful branches are thrown away, they wither,

and are burned. Sounds unpleasant. Well, that's actually not what the Greek tells us God is doing. Where we hear "removed", the Greek (*aerei*) is better translated as "lifts up". Actual grapevines, when left to their own devices, travel along the ground rather than upward. They send shallow roots into the ground and don't have much energy to put into producing fruit. "So when a vinedresser comes along, and sees branches lying on the ground, he knows that what they need is not to draw their own nutrients from the soil, but to get their nutrients from the vine, because the vine's root system goes deep. And so, what does he do? He lifts the branch up off the ground and supports it in the air with a trellis or lattice work. This way, the branch has no choice but to draw all of its sustenance from the vine, and as a result, will produce many sweet clusters of grapes" (redeeminggod.org). This lifting up of those things within us that are unproductive, unloving, and need God's care shows us the loving, nurturing God that we worship. Giving all of ourselves into God's care is always a choice and, when we choose not to, we do wither and die. Life without God is not really life at all for it is only with God that we have the deep joy that sustains us through good and bad because we trust God's promises, holding firm to the sure and certain hope of the resurrection when we have life with God in the fullness of God's kingdom on earth as in heaven.

The good in us, those things which embody God's love and reveal God's love, those things God works with, 'cleanses' is the word Jesus uses, so that we produce even more of God's love in our lives and in the world. This is not possible without God. Jesus makes that abundantly clear today. "Apart from me you can do nothing," he says. And that makes sense – you can't produce God's love if you don't have God. As I heard someone once say, we are not just asked to do *good* things, we're asked to do *Jesus* things. We are asked to work with God to transform the world into the

fullness of God's kingdom through every thought, word, and deed. "Ask for whatever you wish," Jesus assures us, "whatever you wish will be done for you" because our wishes will be God's wishes, our desires will be God's desires. Abiding in God, all that we ask from God will be for the fulfillment of his purpose. As you will hear in Eucharistic Prayer 1, "In all things [Jesus] fulfilled your gracious will." That is our goal as well...to become more and more like Christ until "in all things" we fulfill God's will.

With our hearts knit to God's heart, this is possible. We cannot do it without God and we cannot do it without each other. We exist as church only in community just as God exists in community: three persons, one God. Together we have the support and knowledge and resources needed to grow and bear more fruit. The interesting thing about fruit – all fruit, no matter the tree, no matter the vine – all fruit is produced to benefit life beyond the tree, beyond the vine. The seeds from the fruit are spread around to produce more growth just as God is given glory by the love we spread around us.

In the gardens of Hampton Court Palace near London, England, there is a grapevine, planted over 250 years ago by Lancelot Brown. Its stem is a whopping 4 metres (13 feet) around and has one root that is at least two feet thick. Its longest branch is about 40 metres (over 130 feet). Because of skillful cutting and pruning, that one vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even two hundred feet from the main stem, it bears much fruit because the life of the vine flows through to the farthest tips (adapted from redeeminggod.com). Our God is infinitely longer, broader, wider than any grapevine found on earth and God's boundless love flows even to the farthest tips so that we can *have* measureless love and *give* measureless love. Let us abide in God and God in us and, together, bear much fruit.