

“Abide in God”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
May 6, 2012

John 15: 1-8

When we moved to our new house a couple of years ago, we knew that one of the great assets of this property were the plentiful, tall trees. They provide great shade from the summer heat, and are beautiful in the autumn.

However, the trees haven't had much regular maintenance for many years. As a result, some have grown so intertwined with others that they are choking one another off. In fact, a few have started to die off because they haven't been trimmed or pruned for years. In a few weeks, we're having Brownsburg Tree Care, the company which did work for us around the church here a few years ago, come and do the necessary pruning. In order for the healthiest trees to flourish, the ones which are ailing need to be removed, and the healthy ones need to be pruned.

This same imagery is used by Jesus to describe how God works in him and in us to be his disciples. In talking about himself, Jesus says that God the Father “removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.” Rather than letting the dead branches deep inside the bush take up space which could otherwise be used for the good branches, the vine grower cleanses the vine of these unnecessary limbs. And, so that the bush grows to its fullest potential, “every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” God knows the branches to prune which bear fruit, and the branches to eradicate which produce no fruit.

But Jesus then takes this analogy to another level, and points to how he functions as the vine for us, the branches. “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.” Have you ever tried to grow a shoot by itself once it's broken away from the vine? It's very difficult, because once it is broken away from its root system and has lost the source of its nutrients it had grown accustomed to, it is very hard to train it to develop its own. It is no different for us when we try to be disciples of Jesus Christ without “abiding” in the vine of our Lord. If we attempt to serve Christ apart from his calling and love, then we will wither and die without relying on the source of our life.

Throughout this passage, a verb is used which I think is very important to understand our relationship with Jesus Christ. “Abide in me as I abide in you . . . Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers . . . If you abide in me, and my words abide in you . . .” To “abide” has a variety of meanings, including “to rest or

dwell, to remain or continue, and to adhere to or maintain.” Whichever way we translate this verb, it is clear that “to abide” is central in understanding our relationship with our Lord.

Just as a branch is connected and dwells in the source of its life, the vine, so too must we remain rooted to the source of our life, Jesus Christ. But it is a two-way street. We also must be willing to allow Jesus to abide in us. We may seek to abide in Jesus’ words and lessons, and refuse to hear them honestly for what they are saying. If we are only willing to abide in Christ and not allow him to abide in us, then we will never fully develop into the potential disciples which God has created us to be.

How does Christ abide in us and us in him? It happens in our spiritual disciplines – study, prayer, and personal growth. It happens in our openness to the Spirit’s leading – grounded in changeless truths while being transformed by new experiences. It happens within relationships and communities of faith, at all stages of life.

On my way to New Orleans two weeks ago, I left a day earlier than I have in the past. I drove all day Saturday to Memphis, Tennessee. Memphis is where I was born, it’s where I spent the first twelve years of my life, it’s where my father was an associate pastor, and my mother taught preschool. My childhood was spent in Memphis, and my earliest memories of faith and church were formed in this place. However, since we moved from there in 1983, I had maybe been back to Memphis less than five times.

Maybe this is what happens when you hit forty years old, but I had this yearning, wondering, searching to reconnect with my spiritual roots. Our family had not had contact with Buntyn Presbyterian Church in over ten years. But, I thought I’d stay the night in Memphis on Saturday, drive around the old neighborhood, and see what I might find on Sunday morning. I had no idea if anyone was still there from when we were there, or even if the church was still in existence.

The church was still there, and when I drove by it Saturday evening, I saw that worship was at 11:00 a.m. I arrived on Sunday morning around 10:45 and waited in the parking lot. At five until eleven, I decided to go in. As I walked up the steps, I hoped maybe I could just sneak in the back and not be noticed.

Well, that didn’t happen. I walked into a crowd of people in the narthex, where they have coffee and fellowship before worship. A woman came up to me and greeted me, and at first I didn’t give my name. But, I give her lots of credit, because she said, “I didn’t catch your name?” I replied, “My name is Frank Mansell.” And it was as if the entire room stood still, people’s heads turned toward me, and I knew I was not going to be inconspicuous the rest of the morning.

The church is much smaller now than when we were there. But there were several people who remembered us, and even a few I knew

myself. There was the woman who taught with my mom at her preschool, and the woman who was the church secretary during most of our time there. My favorites were the two women who came up to me and said they were some of my babysitters when I was “Little Frank.” It’s not every Sunday that someone comes up to you and says, “I remember changing your diaper!”

Whether I knew people or not, I was overwhelmed by a sense of welcome and belonging. Although it was a small group, the worship was genuine and connected. When I shared with them that I was now a minister, there was a real sense of joy and pride on their part. This congregation had taken their baptismal vows seriously forty years earlier. Now, for them to hear that their nurture, teaching, and care had resulted in a minister of the Word and Sacrament, I imagine it was a bright moment for a congregation which has faced much struggle and challenge the last several years.

Buntyn was where God and Christ first abided in me. It was in that community of faith that I was taught to love my neighbor as God loves me. It was there that I was shown brotherly and sisterly love, even though I am an only child. It is in community that we are grounded in God’s love through Jesus Christ. I hope twenty-five years from now, Erin and Heather might come back to John Knox and reconnect with this community of faith, where they have learned of God’s abiding presence.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. If we allow him to abide in us, we will always abide in him, receiving the strength to get through this journey called life. May Christ’s abiding presence rest in, with, and through all of us, this day, and all our days to come.

Thanks be to God. Amen.