

## **Abide in Me John 15:1-8**

### **Did you enjoy my best gift?**

Did you enjoy my best gift for the church last Sunday? Many people told me that I should share my best gift with Asbury more often than I have in past years. Someone told me that Juhee and I are complete opposites. As you saw last Sunday, Juhee is a ball of energy. Compared to Juhee, my energy level seems low. One person asked me how I live with a person so full of energy. Unlike me, Juhee tends to pour all her energy out so you may feel that Juhee is like an energizer bunny. But you need to know that to be a ball of energy, Juhee first needs to be fully charged with energy. I am not a ball of energy but I am more like a stable power supply charger. My job is to recharge discharged-Juhee at home. This is how we live as husband and wife. Right? We are different but our differences complement each other and we grow together.

I believe this is the same as the church. We are all different but we become one family in Christ and we grow together by supporting each other. Our differences are God's gifts that enrich our lives. Imagine how our church would look like if the pews at Asbury were filled only with persons like me. How would it look? The church would be dead silent and very boring. Imagine how our church would look if everyone sitting in the pews was like David Dorsey who is known for his sense of humor. No one would be able to breath during the worship service because everyone would keep laughing and making each other laugh. Our differences are blessings and because we are different, Asbury UMC can do our ministry.

### **Morning Glory Vine**

We are different but we are connected with each other in Christ. In today's scripture, Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." The vine is the central image for Jesus' message. What first comes to your mind when you think of a vine? I know the vine Jesus refers to is a grape vine but when I hear the word, "vine," I think of a different vine.

As the pandemic isolation prolonged, Juhee and I started gardening and planted some flowers. My favorite flower was Morning Glory. We planted a small morning glory vine near the fence in the back yard. [ppt] We didn't put up a trellis but the morning glory vines gradually climbed up the fence and eventually cover the entire fence. I was amazed at how the small vine gradually climbed high up the fence. In the pandemic situation, I could glimpse a kind of hope in this flower. Covid-19 was like a wall of despair blocking our way forward. Everything had to stop for months. But during that time, the Morning Glory slowly but persistently climbed the wall and covered it in green and then beautiful flower blooms each morning.

Whenever I looked at it, I felt like the morning glory vine and I were climbing a wall of despair, hand in hand. A poet wrote, "It grasps the despair and will not let go until the despair is all covered in green." (From the poem, Ivy) Watching the morning glory each morning gave me hope to endure the lockdown situation. Of course, grapevines and morning glories are different but grapevine are also climbers. [ppt] They gradually but persistently climb up the wall and grow together.

Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches." We are the breaches from one vine and our life is bound together. Martin Luther King Jr. said, "All life is interrelated. We are all caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied into a single garment of destiny." This is how God has created the world. All life is interrelated so we all are responsible for global injustice such as racism, poverty and the climate crisis. All life is interrelated so we can also overcome all walls of

injustice and despair when we stay connected and walk together slowly but persistently with hope in the coming kin-dom of God. My friends, stay connected. Pray for one another. Care for those who are going through a difficult time with your love. In this way, we can slowly but persistently climb the wall, whatever it is, and cover it in hope and love.

### **I am the vine, you are the branches!**

Staying connected with other Christians is important but we also need to stay connected to the true source of life. Jesus said, “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.” Jesus differentiates between the vine and the branches. He is the vine. He is the source. Just like branches cannot bear fruit or grow apart from the vine, we cannot bear fruit or grow without Jesus. This is the simple truth but we often forget it when we face a desperate situation.

Many of you may have read that three Warwick Catholic Parishes will be merged due to declining membership. We are saddened by this news because their story is also our story. In 2019, the New England Annual Conference reduced the numbers of districts from 9 to 7. All Christian denominations are losing members while the religiously unaffiliated are rising in the United States. This trend makes us anxious for two reasons. First, we are anxious because the number of church members directly relates to the financial condition of the church and its organizational survival. Second, from the very beginning, Methodists have understood that increasing membership is a sign that the work of the church and the will of God are aligned.<sup>1</sup> In other words, numerical decline in church membership is often understood as a demonstration of failure. We often feel that we are failing what we are called to do. So out of a sense of duty and desperation, many churches look for new church growth programs. We plan to have a cookout or family activities that can draw people back to the church. While we try our best to bear fruit, we forget the simple truth. “We are the branches, not the vine.”

I am not blaming you, I am talking to myself. As a pastor, I often feel that I am responsible for church growth. Recently, I have thought a lot about our way moving forward. I’ve read books about church growth and thought about mission ideas for our communities, but there is no easy answer. This makes me anxious. However, while preparing today’s sermon, God told me what I have missed. “Christ is the vine and you are a branch.” Instead of thinking of how to bear numerical fruits, we first need to abide in Christ. We must stay connected to the source of life in order to bear fruit.

### **Abide in Me**

Jesus said, “Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.” How can we abide in Christ? Christian practices are designed to help us to abide in Christ. Worship, prayer, reading and meditating on the Bible, fellowship and outreach... all these Christian practices help us abide in Christ. Once we trust God and try to live as Jesus Christ taught us... as we abide in Christ, the vine... God will continue to supply us with strength, courage and joy.

Also, Jesus promised, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you! This is an amazing promise but is it really possible? We wish to regrow our beloved Asbury and

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<sup>1</sup> <https://um-insight.net/in-the-church/umc-global-nature/us-membership-decline-and-the-rhetoric-of-the-global-church/>

fill our church with joyful noise from kids and youth. Is it really possible? I believe it is possible. When we abide and follow the way of life, God will surely supply all we need.

My clergy friend shared his experience. His second appointment was a church that moved from a full-time appointment to a part-time appointment. The church membership was declining. The church had a small reserve of funds available but people were afraid of using it because their financial resources were gradually drying up. Everyone acknowledged that they needed to do something to change their trajectory but anxiety and fear kept them from moving forward. After multiple meetings and discussions, people honestly faced their fear and anxiety. People agreed that “if our church has to die even after we pour out all our energy and money, it dies. But we will not be dying slowly by doing nothing. Rather we will do ministry worth dying for.” The church was located in an economically underprivileged area and the church decided to provide a free community supper. Does this sound like a good idea? A small church with little money provides a free meal for community!! What do you think? The church put out a free will donation box but they didn’t expect much from it. However, after the first community supper, they were able to collect enough money to run a second community supper. They did a second community supper, third and fourth... This ministry has become a stepping stone for the revitalization of the church. The church grew and a few years later, the church became once again a fulltime charge. I am not saying that we should do the same. I am not saying that all will be well if we start a new project. No.

But I believe God will provide for the needs of those who fully commit their lives to God’s mission. I believe God will provide our daily bread when we decide to share our bread with others in need. As we abide in Christ and reach out to our community with love, Jesus Christ, the true vine, will bring the source and new energy to us.

As we prepare our way moving forward into a post-pandemic world, pray for the church. Pray for the leaders of the church and for your pastor. Stay connected! Abide in Christ! Amen.