

John 15: 1-8 Pruning

John's gospel contains several declarations by Jesus which tell the disciples who he is and what he has come to do. In John these mission statements are found in what are called the "I am" declarations. One of the most familiar is "I am the light of the world" from John 8: 12. Here he tells us that he reveals to the world God's love and care for it. In our gospel text last week, Jesus told the disciples: "I am the good shepherd." This was a statement both about his divinity and his mission to gather and protect those God claims. And in chapter 14, Jesus responds to a question by Thomas telling him "I am the way, and the truth and the life." These statements point to Jesus' identity as the son of God and the way people are to come to the Almighty. Jesus teaches that he provides light in darkness enabling sight, protection from things which would scatter those claimed by God and revelation of the way to become reconciled with God. Today's passage provides an illustration for the disciples not only about Jesus' mission but how they are to proceed now that the Good Shepherd has gathered them and the truth has been revealed to them. This discourse by Jesus comes on the night of his betrayal according to John's gospel. Jesus is preparing the disciples not only for the coming separation as he journeys to the cross, but also for the separation which will occur after the resurrection when he ascends into heaven. Today's passage illuminates for us a theme of the Gospel of John—Christ claims us so that we abide in him but also so that he abides in us. This gives the disciples comfort and hope for the future. This term—abiding—is one we hear often in John, but it isn't a term encounter elsewhere or that we make use of in our current vocabulary. The Oxford dictionary lists seventeen uses of the word abide, but eight of them are considered obsolete. For example when we read a motel advertisement it doesn't invite us to abide there for the night. When the ESPN play by play announcer for a baseball game sums up the play at the end of the inning he doesn't say there was one hit, a walk and two left abiding on base. When a coach turns down an offer to move from one team to another, we don't say that he will abide with the same institution instead of moving. Yet to stay, to reside, to remain are all possible and valid meanings for the word abide. But the concept of abiding carries with it a more lasting nuance than just staying or remaining—abiding has to do with persevering, continuing, lasting, staying with it for the long haul. Abiding is not a temporary condition or short term relationship. No wonder this term has become rare in our age of instant change and quick sound bites. This concept and commitment to the long term is rare today. The absence of the concept of abiding in our contemporary society diminishes us. We no longer abide in relationships with each other as the normal course of events. Ours is a mobile society in most ways which makes abiding in friendships and other relationships unusual. The new norm is now to have a multitude of friends via the internet but we don't interact face to face. This discourse by Jesus is given as he is surrounded by his disciples on the night that he is betrayed—the night that the disciples definitely fail to abide with him. Yet he talks to them of a committed relationship which will continue beyond all the events from this night past the ascension. He does this by using the image of the vine and its branches which are cared for by the vine grower. The image of God as the tender of the vineyard is another one like that of the shepherd which has been used historically by the prophets to describe Israel's relationship with God. The prophets often lament how Israel failed to be fruitful branches growing from the vine which God planted. The

disciples, like Israel according to the prophets and like us today, will fail to always abide. Abiding takes its strength from Christ who went to the cross for all of us in our sins. Now that he has risen, our abiding rests on belonging—he in us and us in him. This is not an abstract ideal but a response to his offer of grace. Verse 4: “Abide in me as I abide in you.” His abiding happens first. It is not subject to conditions. It is a simple statement—“I abide in you.” Then comes his invitation for us to abide in him. First there is grace, then comes our commitment. This is the ongoing Easter miracle that Jesus works us into—the astonishing new creation ushered in by the raising of God’s Son. Jesus abides, lasts, endures, continues, hangs in, holds on—whatever way you want to describe his claim—to us and in us. Jesus does this despite the fact that we forget what it means that we have been baptized into his life. Despite our flawed abiding in him, he does not stop his abiding in us. As we will affirm later—in life and in death we belong to God and nothing can separate us from that love shown through Jesus Christ. Jesus proclaims that he is the true vine twice in this passage and uses the word abide eight times stressing the importance of the relationship. In this statement he affirms that he is the source of life, the life source for the branches. The vine and the branches are not stagnant but growing. The vine doesn’t go anywhere but is always present providing strength and sustenance for the branches. The branches hold fast to the vine, letting life flow through them so that they bear fruit. The branches are free to grow because the vine supports them. This is abiding; a continuing relationship. This is a description of how our relationship with Christ works. And the relationship bears fruit. Fruitfulness is also important in this passage as it is also mentioned eight times. The equal number of references to abiding and fruitfulness strongly suggest that the two are connected. In fact, the opening verse of this passage concerns the fruitfulness of the branches present on the vine. There are two actions which will be taken by the vine grower in regard to the branches. These actions are related to the fruitfulness of the branches—those that bear no fruit will be cut off; those that do bear fruit will be pruned. Pruning is also a type of cutting back branches which is done to promote the health of the vine and increase the fruitfulness. Grapevines do need pruning as grapes need sun but not too much. There is a precision tending which gives the perfect balance of light and shade. And grapevines are not the only plant from this region where pruning results in increased yields. Throughout the Middle East it is a usual sight to see large groves of olive trees. Sometimes you will see groves where the branches have been cut back so that no leaves are seen. Periodically these trees are drastically cut back so that only the main trunk which appears dead is left. But then from this trunk will sprout many branches which all bear an increased yield of olives. The lack of fruitfulness comes about when the branch withers because it is no longer connected to the vine. Verse 5: “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because away from me you can do nothing.” Fruit bearing is not something that the branches do by force of will. The fruit happens because the branches are connected to the true vine and the vine grower is good. These withered branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. This sounds very ominous. It is very easy to read this part of the passage as one of judgment and threat. But we have to remember exactly what Jesus said. It was not “abide in me or else”. That would be a very different thing from what Jesus said. Jesus said instead, “abide in me as I abide in you.” Jesus says “as I abide in you” as a given. This is not just good advice to disciples. It is not just an

invitation. The thrust of this passage is a promise that no matter what happens to them or us Jesus will be with there—abiding with us. That no matter what happens Jesus will hold onto us. And that no matter what happens God in Jesus will bring all things to a good end. The disciples hearing this are about to be cut down by the crucifixion and death of Jesus, but he is telling them that despite appearances he and they will survive and flourish. John's audience when this was written had been thrown out of their synagogue and scattered. They have reason to feel that they have been abandoned, but John is telling them that they have not been cut off but pruned for a more abundant and fruitful life. No doubt this vision of an abundant life was difficult for them to believe. At first, there was little evidence available to the disciples or to John's community that they had not been abandoned. And sometimes it is still hard to believe on our end as well since so much of life simply tears at us with no evidence that it is toward some more fruitful future. But amid our uncertainty and distress, Jesus still promises that he will not abandon us but rather will cling to us so that we endure, persevere and maybe even flourish among present difficulties. We branches wither when we do not respond by abiding in Christ. The pruning which takes place on the branches is done to shape them by the one who tends to them. We are just branches ourselves, not vines, and certainly not in charge of the vine. We don't make ourselves fruitful. We cannot even discern what is happening with the rest of the branches on the vine. For all we know what looks like removal is actually pruning for abundant fruitfulness. But whatever is going on with the other branches is in any case the work of the vine grower. In John, our sole responsibility to the rest of the branches is love. It is also worth keeping in mind that branches don't live off their own fruit—they are sustained by the vine. The fruit is for someone else. Despite the image of withered branches being cast into the fire and destroyed, this passage is finally a passage about grace. We bear fruit not by squeezing it out of ourselves, but because we are extensions of the vine, pruned by the gardener God who wants us to be fruitful and to be drawn into to unity as the body of Christ. God's love, presence, and pruning in our lives are all gifts. We choose the abiding place of our soul. If we want to bear Jesus fruit, then we choose to abide in him because he abides in us. Thanks be to God.