

<sup>1</sup> “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. <sup>2</sup> He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup> 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. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. <sup>9</sup> As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father’s commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup> I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. <sup>12</sup> “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

John 15:1-12

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“Because I Said So”

Rev. Amy Terhune

A communications professor was giving a lecture to a ‘theories in advertising’ class on company slogans and was asking his students if they were familiar with them. “Brenda,” he asked, “can you tell me which company has the slogan ‘Don’t Leave Home Without It’?” Brenda answered with the correct credit card company. “Joe, which company has the slogan ‘Fly the Friendly Skies’?” Joe answered quickly with the correct airline. “Lynn, how about naming the company whose slogan is ‘You’re in good hands’?” Lynn easily came up with the correct insurance company. “Now Jake, tell me which company bears the slogan ‘Just Do It’?” Jake responded, “It’s my Mom.” The professor indicated that this was incorrect and that he was looking for the name of a shoe company.

To which Jake said “That shoe company stole their motto from my Mom!”

“How do you figure that?” asked the highly skeptical professor.

“Well,” said Jake, “she’d tell me to do something, and I’d say, ‘Why?’ She’d say ‘just do it’ and I’d say ‘Why?’ again. And if she answered “because I said so,” then I knew that if I valued my life, I’d better ‘just do it’. [originally from <http://kcbx.net/~tellswor/>; used in “Love and Obey” by King Duncan, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com); adapted here significantly.]

I don’t know if Jake passed the class or not, but he demonstrates a remarkable degree of wisdom. Now, let’s have a moment of honesty here, moms: how many of you have ever (even once) responded to the question ‘why?’ with the answer ‘because I said so!’

I certainly have. I think most parents have resorted to that on occasion, probably because it’s the fastest way we can think of to end an argument when our patience is wearing thin. It is an assertion of authority—one that’s somewhat difficult for a child to circumvent. My daughter once informed me: “that’s not a good reason”. To be fair, I’ve never pretended it was a good reason ... because it isn’t a reason. It’s a statement, and it means: conversation over. That’s the way it is. Deal with it, or deal with my wrath.

It’s not easy to be a parent. Some say it’s harder than ever before. I don’t know that. I just know it’s hard. It’s hard because I’m busy, and there’s a lot going on, and I’m human. It’s hard because I love.

I can't detach myself emotionally. It's hard because I brought children into the world through my body, but they never really belonged to me. They belong to the world. It has been my privilege and responsibility to guide, to love, to comfort, to discipline, to enjoy, but they are not mine. And now they are grown and independent, and I have reached that wonderful place where I can sit back a bit at marvel at who they're becoming. As parents, teachers, grandparents, mentors, and concerned adults, we want the children we love to learn to think, to reason, to evaluate, to follow things out in their mind to their possible conclusions before they act. We want them to be confident, poised, strong, assertive. Who else are they going to practice on but us? Their resistance is how they test themselves, find their identity, figure things out. I've known that and tried to remember it when things got dicey. Sometimes I succeeded. Sometimes, I failed miserably. Thank God for grace.

But knowing this; knowing what I know of how children grow, it stuns me to discover how many people of faith out there would have us believe that we should give, trust, grow, pray, worship, behave, serve, or love because God said so. Conversation over. That's the way it is. Deal with it, or deal with the wrath of God. How is that God any different than we are? Now please don't get me wrong: God does say that we should give, trust, grow, pray, worship, behave, serve, love—especially love—but I have never experienced God to say: conversation over. God, who is infinitely wiser and more patient than I am, is not afraid of 'why?' And time and again, in scripture, God says "let me show you why."

That's what our scripture lesson from John 15 this morning really is—it's an image; Jesus showing us why. But why what? What's the question he's answering? Well, we've got to zoom out a bit to make sense of it all. John 15 is smack dab in the center of what scholars have come to call 'The Farewell Discourse'. John places all of the teaching in chapters 13-17 at the last supper before Jesus is arrested and crucified. These are last words. In Chapter 13, after washing his disciples' feet, Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." That is the heart of the farewell discourse, and Jesus will repeat it over and over again. We heard in vs. 12 of our lesson today. But what the disciples have to be wondering is why should we humble ourselves in servanthood, why should we love others, why should we engage in behavior the world neither recognizes, understands, or values? Why? Don't discount the question. They're going to die for what they believe. They want to know why.

And so, Jesus draws on this image of the vine. It's not a new image. "The vineyard was the symbol of the nation. In America we might think of amber waves of grain, but in Judea they thought of a vineyard. It was a kind of national identity... Isaiah and the Psalms both talk about the vineyard of God. In a word of promise, Jeremiah speaks of a choice vine. In a word of judgment, Hosea speaks an empty vine. And Josephus, the Roman historian, informs us that over the Temple in Jerusalem was carved an exquisite, gold leaf grapevine. It stood as a symbol of national unity. Israel itself was, in the eyes of its people, the true vine, whose roots ran all the way back to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

[adapted significantly from "I Am the True Vine" by Brett Blair, [www.Sermons.com](http://www.Sermons.com).]

Jesus latches on to that; using it to put forth a new vision. The new Israel will not be a geographic location, but a body of people united in their love for God and each other. I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in my love. Just do it, not merely because I say so, but because it is how we experience community and connectedness.

In her reflections on this passage, Gail R. O'Day notes that, "...the image of community that emerges from John 15 is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling. To get the full sense of this interrelationship, it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like. In a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another begins. All run together as they grow out of the central vine.

What this vine image suggests about community, then is that there are no free-standing individuals in community, but branches who encircle one another completely...

“The communal life envisioned in the vine metaphor raises a strong challenge to contemporary western models of individual autonomy and privatism. At the heart of [this] model is social interrelationship and corporate accountability... To bear fruit—that is, to act in love—is a decidedly corporate act, “rooted” in Jesus’ love for the community...” [2 ¶s from Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John”, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, L.E. Keck et al, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg.760.] In other words, it is only together that we can create a culture that fosters love and mutuality. By its very definition, love cannot take place in a bubble. No one can love all by themselves.

Vesta Kelly is famous for saying that “snowflakes are one of nature's most fragile things, but just look at what they can do when they stick together.” We know all too well what they do when they stick together, don’t we?

Abide in my love. Just do it, not merely because I say so, but also because it is how we make a difference in the world. “No branch has pride of place; no one branch can claim precedence or privilege over any other... Fruitfulness is the only differentiation among branches, and the discernment of fruitfulness falls to the gardener, to (God) alone, not any of the branches. [from Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John”, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, L.E. Keck et al, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg.760.] When it comes to what ultimately matters, there are no distinctions between clergy and laity, there are no bishops or cardinals. There are no Catholics or Lutherans or Methodists or Mormons. There are no Fundamentalists or Liberals. There is only fruitful or unfruitful. The ones who abide in love bear fruit. They make a difference.

In a Peanuts cartoon Lucy demanded that Linus change TV channels, threatening him with her fist if he didn't. "What makes you think you can walk right in here and take over?" asks Linus.

"These five fingers," says Lucy. "Individually they're nothing but when I curl them together like this into a single unit, they form a powerful force that is terrible to behold.

"Which channel do you want?" asks Linus. Turning away, he looks at his fingers and says, "Why can't you guys get organized like that?" [from Charles Schultz, original date/publication unknown.]

Lucy, of course, is a bully, but there is a truth there someplace. Those awe-inspiring moments in human history when the whole of society took a step forward happened because a community worked together. We point to individuals like Martin Luther King Jr. or Gandhi, or John Wesley, or Martin Luther, or even Jesus himself. But the power that changed the world—that ushered in love, enlightenment, justice, or equality—did not belong to one man, great as they were, but to a community working with them and that carried on after them. If we want to bear fruit, we must abide in the vine.

But according to this, we must also subject ourselves to pruning. This requires interpretation. The verb used in vs. 3-4 is *Kathairō*, which means both “to prune” and “to cleanse”. It’s impossible to capture in English the wordplay that’s going on here. [extracted from Gail R. O’Day, “The Gospel of John”, The New Interpreter’s Bible, Vol. IX, L.E. Keck et al, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg.757.] Most translations use “to prune” since it fits with the agricultural imagery that Jesus is using. And it’s not inaccurate, exactly, but requires caution. Taken to extremes, it can be manipulated to suggest that God somehow ‘causes pain’ in order to force learning or growth. Some people take comfort in understanding suffering in life as God pruning us. I’m not one of them. Nothing does so well at drawing out the reality of suffering as does this day. For every beautiful story of motherhood, there is a heart-rending one—those of women who brought children into the world but couldn’t raise them with any kind of loving support; those who became mothers far too soon, those who would give anything to be mothers but could never conceive, those who have lost children or mothers far too soon. This is a difficult day for many, and we must pause to acknowledge that reality. Can we learn and grow from the suffering we experience?

Yes, and that is the best possible outcome. Am I willing to say the master gardener is doing this to us? No. I believe God is with us in suffering; and therefore, can help us learn to cope and heal. But the human condition is such that are broken people in a broken world, which means that for now, suffering is part of order of things.

Rather, this has to do with purity of the heart. It has to do with being primed for love; with allowing our hearts to reach their full potential. This is about health and wellness, not chastisement or punishment. And, unlike a vine in a real vineyard, God only acts at our request. We have to solicit the pruning. It's voluntary. If we abide in the vine, it means that we accept the fact that we will sometimes be called upon to subject our individual desires to the good of the whole. It means we will accept suffering for the sake of advancing Christ. It means we will learn to look for God's grace in our suffering.

Abide in my love. Just do it, not merely because I say so, but fundamentally, because it is who we are created to be—it is our nature, our means of energy, our life-force. Apart from the vine, there are no roots, no leaves, no photosynthesis, no fruit. Apart from the vine, we die. We become nothingness. We lose our essential selves.

When Robert Ingersoll, the notorious skeptic, was in his heyday, two college students went to hear him lecture. As they walked down the street after the lecture, one said to the other, "Well, I guess he knocked the props out from under Christianity, didn't he?" The other said, "No, I don't think he did. Ingersoll did not explain my mother's life, and until he can explain my mother's life, I will stand by my mother's God." [from James S. Hewett, *Illustrations Unlimited*, Tyndale, 1972, p. 381.]

That young man was onto something. How does one explain a loving life? It goes beyond semantics and hermeneutics to something deeper—to life itself; to perseverance, indwelling, participation. In short, to abiding. Abiding in the vine. Abiding in Christ. Abiding in love. I want to close this morning with something that came to me over the internet. It may sound familiar because it uses Paul's great treatise on love from I Corinthians 13.

If I live in a house of spotless beauty with everything in its place, but have not love, I am a housekeeper—not a homemaker. If I have time for waxing, polishing, and decorative achievements, but have not love, my children learn cleanliness - not godliness. Love leaves the dust in search of a child's laugh. Love smiles at the tiny fingerprints on a newly cleaned window. Love wipes away the tears before it wipes up the spilled milk. Love picks up the child before it picks up the toys. Love is present through the trials. Love is found, not in saying so, but in living so. Love reprimands, reproves, and is responsive. It is not domineering or impatient. Love crawls with the baby, walks with the toddler, runs with the child, then stands aside to let the youth walk into adulthood. Love is the key that opens salvation's message to a child's heart. Before I became a mother I took glory in my house of perfection. Now I glory in God's perfection of my child. As a mother, there is much I must teach my child, but the greatest of all is love. [Author Unknown] Amen.