

May 2, 2021

By Pastor Michelle Kuhlman

St. Andrew Lutheran Church

I must begin this morning with an admission. I am probably the last person who needs to be speaking about gardening, pruning, and especially vine tending. I have a notoriously black thumb, and I identify with something I heard recently when someone said they saw themselves as more of a plant hospice worker than a gardener. (Insert riotous laughter here.) Perhaps I could have prepared better by gaining real-life insight through a field trip to our nearby Arrington Vineyards – purely for research purposes, of course.

I am sure that many of you know far more than I do about these things, but my basic understanding is that grapevines do need to be pruned, because grapes need sun – but they don't need too much. It can be a delicate balance to get the right amount of light and shade. Proper pruning can lead to optimum fruit-bearing.

In the Gospel text this morning, we get a pretty clear understanding of how things go: God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches. That summary works for me, and as I used to say, "Can I be done now?" Well, soon, but let's take a bit of a closer look first.

Here we have the last of Jesus' "I AM" statements. He says it twice: "I am the true vine" and "I am the vine..." Recall from vine growing 101 that the vine is the source of life for the branches. Aha! Jesus is a source of life for us! We depend on the vine.

You may have noticed that there are other things repeated in these eight verses. The word "abide" comes up eight times, and "bear fruit" appears six times. Something tells me this doesn't happen by accident.

When we think of the word "abide," many of us may think of the hymn "Abide with Me," where the first stanza begins "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide. The darkness deepens, Lord, with me abide..." I don't know about

you, but to me this feels like abiding marks the slowing down of things, it has a more passive feel to it. I think the way Jesus uses the word abide here gives a more active sense – when we are abiding, we are taking in what is offered to us – as branches, that means nourishment, sunlight and a chance for growth. As people of faith, abiding looks like taking in the Word, engaging in worship, praying, living life in community, holding on to the promises of God, and much more.

The repetition of “bearing fruit” is worth noting as well. Bearing fruit is the result of a good vine and an attentive gardener. It happens because of those things – the branches don’t choose to bear fruit or not – it’s a natural result. To get good fruit, though, there is often some difficult change that takes place. Anyone who has ever pruned back beautiful shrubs and trees can tell you that it can be hard to do it, but it removes pieces that will impede future growth and flourishing. It is done with the promise of something good coming in the future.

As we think about bearing fruit and what it might look like in our own lives, consider that bearing fruit is far more than just doing good deeds. It’s a way of living and being. Jesus speaks of bearing fruit in terms of discipleship. The text we hear this morning is the beginning of what is called the “farewell discourse.” Jesus speaks these words on the night of his arrest. He is preparing the disciples for the time soon to come when he will no longer be with them. The main way they (and we) bear fruit is by emulating Jesus – loving the world and being sent into it when Jesus isn’t present.

As we move into a new time in the life of the church, especially here at Saint Andrew, we have an opportunity to do some reflection as well as some forward thinking. The pandemic has changed us all, and it has certainly changed how we “do” church. How we live together as a family of faith even when we are physically apart from one another. The time of pastoral transitions has been a big thing as well. How exciting it is to look forward to the arrival of the new pastors and to dream about what it will be like to begin ministry with them!

“Doing” and “being” church will likely continue to morph and change moving into the future. We have had to make all sorts of adaptations and probably will make more in the months and years ahead. But we have seen that we are capable of doing so. This has been possible because we have continued to abide in the Lord.

While things may look different, we remember that the mission of the church hasn't changed. We are still called to bear fruit – to be the hands and feet of Christ. We are called to bear God's love to all the world. The ways in which we get there might feel a little messy – things can feel hard, we may not always agree with one another, but together we do it. We rely on each other and we depend on God, the vine grower and Jesus, the vine. May we continue to abide. May we bear much fruit. And may our neighbors be all the better for it.

Amen.

