

“THREE SIMPLE RULES: DO GOOD”

Rev. Matt Anderson

God's Word: 2 Peter 1:3-11 (NLT)

Gospel: John 15:1-11 (NLT)

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. ³ You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

⁵ “Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. ⁷ But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! ⁸ When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

⁹ “I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. ¹⁰ When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. ¹¹ I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow!

Three Simple Rules: Stay in Love with God

In our passage from John this morning Jesus is sharing about gardening in a special vineyard in which his father is the gardener. Jesus himself is the vine and we who follow him are the branches. To produce the grapes on the vine, the branches are to abide in Jesus, the true vine. Jesus then details that we, the branches, cannot bear fruit unless we abide in Him. Abiding is a repeated word in this passage but what does it mean? A couple of definitions suggest: to remain stable or fixed in a state or to continue in a

place. Just as vine has branches attached to it, we are to remain attached to God through the true vine, Jesus. Our intentionality and attention are needed to continue in that state of being attached to Jesus, to stay in the state of abiding with Jesus to produce Godly fruit. Because if we do not, we are at risk of withering, breaking, and being thrown into the fire and burned. In addition to the negative aspects being burned in the fire, Jesus shares, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

The third general rule of the United Methodist Church is to attend upon all the ordinances of God. Reuben Job talked about the three simple rules and summed this up as "staying in love with God." In other words, "cultivate a lively passion for God and for the world that God created. Wesley also wanted the people called Methodist to stay in love with God, but he was concerned about the means for doing so."

There is a story and illustration that comes from JD Walt (Who was the Dean of Chapel at Asbury Seminary when I was there) of an Anglican priest Hule Goddard who once served as a professor at Columbia International University in South Carolina. (Goddard) was preaching in their chapel and His text was John 15, like ours. "He camped out on the early part of the passage and Jesus' word, "I am the vine. You are the branches. If you abide in me as I abide in you, you will bear much fruit." Hule went on to make the predictable application (like I have multiple times when encountering this passage), equating abiding with spiritual disciplines like reading the Bible, prayer, and fasting. The more we do these things, the more we will bear much fruit. In other words, our work is to suck the sap out of the vine.

After the message Hule was approached by a student. Turns out she was a PhD Botany student. She offered the obligatory, "Good sermon," and then remarked he had gotten the part about the vine and the branches backwards. She said it was more like the vine pushes its sap into the branches. The branches don't strive to suck the sap out of the vine. They merely stay attached and receive the sap as it flows from the vine. This is how fruit is born...The vine pushes its sap into the vine."

I'm not a botanist or a gardener so I did some of my own research about the way grapes grow and it changed my perspective of this passage Jesus is speaking about. I used to think like Fr. Hule did that we must "suck the sap out of the vine," with our actions in our spiritual walk with the Lord. The onus is on us

to do the work to create connection with God. John Wesley would call these connection point's ordinances or means of grace. Wesley describes "the practices that kept alive the relationship between God and humans vital, alive, and growing." (Job, 53) We sometimes call these things, spiritual disciplines, "practices that will help keep us positioned in such a way that we may hear and be responsive to God's slightest whisper of direction and receive God's promised presence and power every day and in every situation." These spiritual disciplines are where we learn God's love for us and where our love for God is developed. But after the story and my research I've come to think of these more as connection points where can be given the nutrients to grow and produce the good fruit Jesus is talking about in this passage.

Jesus even begins this passage with his relationship with his Father. He says I am the vine, and my Father is the gardener. In Jesus' relationship with his Father, "he found not only his strength and guidance but his greatest joy in communion, companionship with his loving Abba." He took time to develop that relationship with his Father. He was so intimate in his relationship that he uses a childlike term to describe the Father God. Even though Jesus was God himself incarnate, Jesus still needed to get away and develop his earthly relationship by having connection points with his Abba. Getting away from crowds and praying, listening and interacting. Jesus modeled what it meant to live in such a way to stay in love with the Father God.

Spiritual disciplines are our way of connecting to Jesus and to love God. However just like grapes come in different varieties and our connection points can be different for different people. The way you connect with God may be different than how I connect with God. But there are some essentials: Daily prayer, Bible Reading, participation in the life of a Christian Community, acts of giving and doing good, and sharing the love of Jesus with others. Communion, fasting, being in a small group, tithing, walking in nature, reading the Bible, praying, these are a few of the ways some people connect with God. But I'm sure you have your own way. These connecting points help us develop our relationship with God, opening us up to the "sap" that gives us life and love. They help us stay in love with God by learning more about Him and relating with Him. "Staying in love with God was the primary issue of a faithful life (in

Biblical times), and it is today. For from such a life of love for God will flow the goodness and love of God to the world.”

We can't Love People without the foundational message that God loves me, and I love God. We cannot live Holy Lives without sustaining the love with God. Staying in love with God doesn't just mean doing some reading in the Bible to tick it off a checklist. It's about being connected to the vine and being open to Jesus' movement in our lives through the Holy Spirit. It's about feeding the lambs, tending the sheep, and providing for the needs of others! It's about sharing that love God has for us with everyone around us. Often, I like to tell people they are missionaries in their community. As you leave worship you may see the sign, No Entering the Mission field. Did you know that I'm not just called to this church but to this community as well? In my appointment letter it says I'm not only appointed to the church as a Co-Pastor with Pastor Becky, but I'm also appointed to Bucyrus and Crawford County. I'm a missionary to Bucyrus and Crawford County called and appointed for this place.

When we abide in Jesus Christ the vine, God produces much fruit through us for his glory. We are in turn are filled with the fruits of the spirit of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the things that we are called to share with others. Friends, these qualities are going to be needed as we encounter all that life has to offer and fulfill the mission to make disciples of Jesus Christ for the transformation of the world. Jesus is calling us to abide in him, to be open through all the connection points we can so that we can stay in love with him do no harm, to do good, and to love all without exceptions. This is the foundation of our faith individually but also for our community of faith. For apart from Christ, we can do nothing. Friends, let us stay in love with God and be open to God's movement through each connection point in life.

Amen.