



ABIDING IN 2023

Sunday 5 February 2023

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

Good morning. As I said last week, I think one thing the Lord wants to keep our attention on this year is abiding in Jesus.

So we will talk A LOT about abiding this year, I also had this banner made – to remind us of this every time we gather. But I'll also be preaching on this theme with 4 or 5 messages scattered throughout the year – often between the bigger series that we do.

Who here is a gardener? I know the obvious gardener here is Clare – but lots of us are good at gardening.

I'm a bit of a novice gardener – I am enthusiastic – enthusiastic enough to really enjoy helping others with the odd spot of gardening – but not quite enthusiastic enough to really grow my own thriving garden.

But I know a few basics. Trees need a lot of constant attention to stay healthy and fruitful. We just got back from a staff retreat down at Ben's parents' farm. They have a small collection of fruit trees there and I was able to pick and eat probably the best peaches I've ever had. Apparently, they weren't amazing last year, but some family friends are staying at the farm at the moment and they've given a lot of TLC ('tender loving care') to the trees and now they're thriving.

Secondly, I know that Plants need pruning to thrive – even if it looks like it's more than they can bear. We did some gardening recently at Sarah's parent's house and I thought I had killed her mum's precious and sentimental African daisies. I tried to prune it and disentangle it from a

neighbouring rose bush – but I thought I'd gone too far and it didn't look all that happy. Happy ending though – we went back and it was looking better than ever.

Thirdly, I know that Weeds seem to be the only thing that grows without intentional effort. I have been slowly helping Malcolm to tame his parent's garden. This has looked like hours and hours of weeding. Less happy ending than the last story – every time we come back it needs weeding again.

Finally, and most profoundly, I know that Parts of a plant need to stay attached to the rest of the plant to live. I've noticed that leaves which fall off our indoor plants don't seem to stay alive for very long.

These are not profound observations – they are probably so basic they'd be on the first page of gardening for dummies, but while they are not profound, they are true – universally true – true regardless of where or when you live. Plants need intentional and constant effort to grow, they need pruning, and they need to stay attached to thrive.

I think BECAUSE these observations are so simple and obvious to us, it is these very observations about gardening that Jesus applied to our discipleship.

Why don't we read our passage for today. If you have your bibles, open to John 15 and we will read verses 1-8.

This is what Jesus said:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." (John 15:1-8)

Isn't this a great passage?

This part of chapter 15 comes in the middle of a long conversation that Jesus is having with his disciples, probably in the week or so before he was crucified. He is preparing them for his departure and for what life will be like when he returns to be with the Father.

Here, Jesus covers the theme of abiding or remaining in him. He uses an extended metaphor to paint a picture of discipleship.

We're going to spend the rest of our time working through it. I think there are five things to pay attention to in this passage.

A bit of a warning – there are some landmines in this passage and I suspect that moving quickly, I'll probably tread on one or two. Jesus says a couple of hard things here, so if anything concerns you or you have any questions, please come and see me afterwards or give me a text or a call.

But let's dive in.

"I am the vine"

Firstly, verse 1, Jesus says, *"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener."*

Man, this is simple but crucial to make sure we have deep in our hearts and minds.

What is the vine that we **MUST** stay connected to?

The vine is not the church – although in other passages we learn that discipleship must be lived out within the context of the church.

The vine is not our family or partner or ISR ('intentional spiritual relationship') – although having great relationships is crucial to discipleship.

The vine is not our theology – again, although having our minds renewed and our thoughts about God and ourselves all squared away is super important – it is not the main thing.

The vine is Jesus. Jesus himself.

Without a genuine, interactive relationship with Jesus – that includes time together, talking and listening – there is no discipleship. This is a great first lesson remember who the vine is! It's Jesus.

Pruning

The second thing Jesus says in verses 2-3 is that we will be pruned as disciples.

I want us to notice this – Who is going to be pruned? Those that are in trouble? No, those that are doing well.

He says that the branches that bear fruit will be pruned so that they're even more fruitful.

Jesus actually plays with words here a little in verses 2 and 3. In verse 2 he talks about

pruning, in verse 3 he says his disciples are already clean because of his word. In John's Greek they sound very similar.

So Jesus is saying to his disciples – you're already pruned because of my teachings – you're clean – but expect more pruning to come.

This is true of us.

If we have put our faith in Jesus and asked him to be our Lord and Saviour, then we are clean – we are pruned – we know that when this happens, our old self dies and stony hearts are cut away and we are born again.

Friends, if you're a disciple – you are clean. But Jesus will keep pruning you.

This idea flows straight from the first – if you're connected to Jesus, the vine, and you're living in that interactive relationship with him, then he will keep pruning you.

He will keep pointing to the parts of your life that aren't bearing fruit and he wants to cut them away.

Grace doesn't mean that Jesus won't want to have a hard word with us from time to time, it doesn't mean that he just wants to ignore our sin – that wouldn't be love would it??

Because he loves us, he will prune us, challenge us, poke and prod us.

In fact, Tom Wright, commenting on this verse, says this: **Pruning "is an intimate process. The vine-dresser is never closer to the vine, taking more thought over its long-term health and productivity, than when he has the knife in his hand."**

Isn't that a beautiful thought.

So are you willing to submit to Jesus's loving pruning as you stay connected to the vine this year?

Praying

I want to skip verses 4-6 because that's where we will land. In verse 7 Jesus talks about the prayer life of those that are connected to him. He says this: **"If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."**

This is a very difficult verse – and it scares me as a pastor.

This verse gives us a picture of discipleship where as we dwell in Jesus, stay connected to the vine, and increasingly become pruned by Jesus, over time, our will begins to merge with

Jesus's will so that eventually the things we want line up with the things that Jesus wants.

That's the picture going on here, I believe.

Grant Burge says in his commentary: "Those whose lives are so in harmony with Jesus will find their prayers controlled by his word, and such prayers will be answered and bring added glory to God".

But I still think it's not as simple as that.

We live in a fallen world - with a devil that can interfere, with a world where things just go wrong, where we ourselves have the power to reject and resist God, where others have the power to reject and resist God.

We long for the day that Jesus returns and he changes all of this, just as he has promised he would.

In the meantime, my pastoral heart in this verse is that we would somehow find the way to hold two things in tension.

Firstly I want us to be expectant that, when we pray, God does miraculous things.

But I also want us to hold on to the truth that things will go haywire from time to time. Jesus himself says in the next chapter of John, "In this world you will have trouble".

How do we do this?

I think it comes from remembering that we put our faith in Jesus, not answered prayer.

I want us to pray more than ever. We are going to be a praying people and we are going to be an expectant people - a church that believes Jesus can do anything.

But can we remember that prayer is never a vending machine and God is never a genie.

God's glory

The fourth idea that comes from this is the purpose of abiding in Jesus. And I think that this ties in nicely with what we've just said about prayer.

Jesus says this: *"This is to my father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciple."* (John 15:8)

What is the purpose of all this? Why do we abide in the vine? Why do we pray? Why do we live out discipleship?

It is all for God's glory. Man, I need to be reminded of this...

It is so easy for me to fall into the trap of assuming that the world and kingdom and God himself revolve around me. That somehow God's greatest goal is that I would live a great life.

The highest priority is the glory of God.

This doesn't mean it's the only priority. It doesn't mean that nothing else matters. You matter, the quality of your life matters - but at the end of the day everything I do - everything we do is to bring glory to the one who created all, who is in all, who is bigger than all, better than all.

I love this because sometimes I need to be reminded that as significant as I am, my whole life exists within a grand tapestry, a bigger story, that is all pointing to the God who deserves all glory.

Remaining

So we've covered a lot already - we know that Jesus is the vine - we know that the Father is the gardener who prunes us - we know that we can expect to be pruned - we know that the more pruned we are the more aligned our pray will be with God - and we know that it's all for the glory of God.

The heart of all this is verses 4-5. This is what Jesus says:

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. (John 15:4-5)

This is the bedrock foundation of discipleship.

I actually struggled to know what to write about these two verses - because they are so central to discipleship.

Talking about abiding is like talking about breathing.

Of course, I could summarise breathing in 3 seconds.

Inhale and exhale - it's how you get oxygen - if you stop you'll die.

But if you take a step back - everything else I could say about living as a human depends on the fact you're breathing - everything else stems from your breathing.

This is what it's like to talk about abiding.

I can summarise it in 3 second - spend time with Jesus - it's how you get grace - if you stop, you'll die.

And everything else about discipleship stems from this.

If I want to talk about evangelism - it presupposes that you're abiding in Jesus.

If I want to talk about becoming like Jesus - it presupposes that you're abiding in Jesus.

Discipleship and everything attached to discipleship - without a lifestyle of staying connected to Jesus - is like life without breathing.

It all stems from abiding - the fruit, the pruning, the prayer, the glorifying - it all comes from abiding.

I want to let Francis Chan riff on this verse for a moment because I think what he says is brilliant.

How do we abide?

It's one of those things that's simple to understand but hard to do.

I think we all know what it means to abide in Jesus.

It means to stay connected. To spend time with him - for all of us the basics are the same: reading scripture, praying, engaging in spiritual practices like silence, fasting, sabbath. On top of this, we are all different, and we all have our ways that make us feel connected with him - like nature, or worship, or colouring in.

This is simple stuff.

But the challenge is doing it. Putting what we know to be important into practice. Daily. For the rest of our lives.

There are no quick fixes or short cuts to abiding.

Abiding is slow - I read once that the life of abiding is a slow cooker not a microwave. It's about dwelling, lingering...Maybe linger in me might be a helpful translation.

Abiding is consistent - is it a habit?

Abiding is purposeful – it's not something we fall into – abiding has a measure of intent.

Everything is going to feel like a barrier to abiding.

I know you're too busy. I know you're too distracted. I am too.

I know you don't have the time or energy or motivation. Neither do I.

But friends – do we believe what Jesus actually said? Do we trust him enough to believe that what he says is true?

He says if you do not abide, you will not bear fruit. He says apart from me, you can do nothing.

This is something we're going to talk about so much this year.

Our lives are too full – too chaotic – too busy to just add abiding into them.

If we're convinced that Jesus is right. If we're convinced that for our own sakes, and for the sake of those around us we need to abide in Jesus – We're actually going to have to change the way that we live our lives.

We're actually going to need to rearrange our lives to put Jesus first.
But that's the essence of discipleship.

When defining what it means to be a disciple, Dallas Willard says that **the disciple is the person who has decided to devote the rest of their lives to becoming more like Jesus and systematically rearranges all of their affairs towards that goal.**

None of us are going to nail 'abiding' by Wednesday. That's not actually even the goal of this message. My hope is that this just becomes something that we want. That we would want to embark or continue on the slow journey of becoming more like Jesus.

That we would want to experience all that he has for us – that we would want the abundant life that he promises – that we would want the fruits of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control that he promises – and that we would want this so much that we would be willing to engage in the lifelong process of rearranging our lives to put Jesus at the centre and to put abiding in him at the centre.