

10.7.18

Practices the Spiritual Disciplines

John 15:1-11

Pastor Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

Among the first things you see when you walk into the sanctuary of BBC are the four wooden carvings over the organ speaker screens. These beautiful pieces were created by folks at BBC. When we began the process of deciding what to have up front as a visual, we wanted Christian images that also reflected our Cape Cod setting. So we settled on a ship, an anchor, a scallop shell, and a fish. Our Christian fish looks very much like a striped bass that is definitely big enough to be a keeper. Around all these symbols is a core image that comes from John 15. There is a vine with branches and fruit. This image comes from the final “I am” saying of Jesus in John’s Gospel. Listen to John 15:1-11.

15 **“I am the true vine**, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that **bears no fruit**. Every branch that **bears fruit** he prunes to make it **bear more fruit**. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 **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.** 5 **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**. 6 Whoever does not **abide in me** is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you **abide in me**, and my words **abide in you**, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you **bear much fruit** and become my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; **abide in my love**. 10 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**. 11 I have said these things to you **so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete**.

The first verse of John 15 tells us something of the relationship of Jesus and the Father. Jesus is the vine, his Father is the vinegrower. The imagery conveys there’s a difference between them – they’re not the same, but also acknowledges their unity.

Jesus' words come with a sharp edge – he says his Father, the gardener, “*Removes every branch in me **that bears no fruit**. Every branch that **bears fruit** he prunes to make it bear more fruit.*” In John 15 Jesus emphasizes the importance of his disciples **bearing fruit** which he mentions no less than six times in these few verses. The image of God coming to the vine with a sharp crooked blade and starting to hack at the branches is a little disturbing, isn't it? Especially since Jesus says that every unfruitful branch in him will be cut off. A significant element of the vine imagery is the threat of divine judgment. The assumption is that fruitless branches are already separated from the love that the vine provides, since they don't bear the fruit of love. The fruit bearing of healthy disciples springs from abiding or living in union with Jesus through loving obedience which leads to joy. Jesus says every branch that bears no fruit withers, is cut off, and burned. Every branch that that bears fruit is pruned to make it bear more fruit. One of the primary ways we remain in or abide in Christ and learn loving obedience is through the daily practice of spiritual disciplines or habits; especially those of prayer, Bible study, and reflection.

Even though Jesus says that each type of branch is going to experience the knife of God, we're often not happy at the prospect of it being applied to us. Urban T. Holmes III wrote in *Spirituality for Ministry*, “*Any good gardener knows that beautiful roses require careful pruning. Pieces of a living plant have to die. It cannot just grow wild. We cannot simply “celebrate growth.” It is more than to be regretted, it is tragic that we seem to have lost the insight that growth in Christ requires careful pruning. **Pieces of us by our intentional action need to die if we are to become the person that is in God's vision**. We are not cutting away a cancerous growth, but making room for intended growth.*”

The reality behind the symbolism of the vine and the branches in John 15 is intimate friendship shaped by daily, regular spiritual practices that put us in position to know Christ more deeply, to discern God's will more clearly, and to be responsive to the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Leslie Weatherhead wrote in, *The Transforming Friendship*, (page 18): “*Christianity is the acceptance of the gift of the friendship of Jesus.*” The gift

of friendship can be life changing. At the Brewster Ladies Library you can learn about Helen Keller spending time in Brewster. For those who don't know the story of Helen Keller, when she was a 6-year-old girl in 1886, her parents, on the advice of Dr. Alexander Graham Bell, sent for a teacher from the Perkins Institution for the Blind in Massachusetts. Anne Sullivan, a 19-year-old orphan, was chosen for the task of instructing Helen. It was the beginning of a close and lifelong friendship between them. By means of a manual alphabet, Anne "spelled" into Helen's hand words like doll or puppy. Two years later Helen was reading and writing Braille fluently. At 10 Helen learned different sounds by placing her fingers on her teacher's larynx and "hearing" the vibrations. Later Helen went to Radcliffe College, where Anne spelled lectures into Helen's hand! After graduating with honors, Helen decided to devote her life to helping the blind and deaf. As part of that endeavor, she wrote many books and articles and traveled around the world making speeches. Since Helen's speeches were not intelligible to some, Anne often translated them for her. Their nearly 50 years of companionship ended when Anne died in 1936. Helen wrote these endearing words about her lifelong friend: *"My teacher is so near to me that I scarcely think of myself apart from her. I feel that her being is inseparable from my own, and that the footsteps of my life are in hers. All the best of me belongs to her – there is not a talent or an inspiration or a joy in me that has not been awakened by her loving touch."*

In many ways, what teacher and friend Anne Sullivan was to Helen Keller, Jesus is to those who follow him. If we take regular time in prayer, Bible study, and reflection then God will help us learn, grow, mature, and realize our spiritual potential just as Anne Sullivan did for Helen Keller. Jesus said in Matthew 10:24-25, *"A disciple is not above the teacher, nor a slave above the master; it is enough for the disciple to become like the teacher, and the slave like the master."* If the gift of human friendship can be life changing, how much more so friendship with Jesus as we become like our teacher.

In all friendships, we take seriously what our friend takes seriously which in John 15 means the commandments of Jesus, especially the command to love. As we abide or remain in Jesus, as we live in him and draw our life from him, we will bear the fruit of

love that God is seeking in us. Brother Lawrence wrote in *The Practice of the Presence of God*, about what it looks like to live in the presence of Christ at all times. *“The most holy practice, the nearest to daily life, and the most essential for the spiritual life, is the practice of the presence of God, that is to find joy in his divine company and to make it a habit of life, speaking humbly and conversing lovingly with him at all times, every moment, without rule or restriction, above all at times of temptation, distress, dryness, and revulsion, and even of faithlessness and sin.”* Practicing the presence of God is living as close to the Lord as a branch does to its vine and we can do that wherever we are and whatever we’re doing throughout the day.

Henri Nouwen said, *“I know that I have to move from speaking about Jesus to letting him speak within me, from thinking about Jesus to letting him think within me, from acting for and with Jesus to letting him act through me. I know the only way for me to see the world is to see it through his eyes.”* In order for Jesus to speak and think within us, and to act through us, there will be things in our life that will need to change or be pruned. There are spiritual disciplines that need to be cultivated and practiced. In Richard Foster’s book, *Celebration of Discipline* he describes twelve spiritual disciplines which he puts in three categories. 1. The Inward Disciplines (most often practiced on our own): Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, and Study. 2. The Outward Disciplines (influencing and shaping our outward lifestyle) Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, and Service. 3. The Corporate Disciplines (habits we engage in with other people) Confession, Worship, Guidance, and Celebration. Dallas Willard in his book *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* places all the spiritual disciplines into two categories. **Disciplines of Abstinence**, are designed to help us remove destructive and unhelpful things from our lives through acts that force us to stop, wait, remove, or eliminate. **Solitude**: The practice of spending time without any others or any distractions. **Silence**: No noise or conversation. Just you and God. **Fasting**: Abstain from food, media, entertainment, or anything else that occupies your time. **Frugality**: Use your money for purposes outside your own needs for a time. **Chastity**: purposely turning away for a time from engaging in the sexual dimension of our life or relationships so we learn not to be ruled by our sexual feelings. **Secrecy**: As much as possible do not

allow anyone to know of the deeds you do or the money you give in order to avoid doing them for the wrong motivations. **Sacrifice:** Stretch your sense of what you can do without for the sake of those who have less.

Disciplines of Engagement:

Study: Memorize Scripture and expand your universe of biblical study helps.

Worship: Engage in corporate worship and include worship in your own prayer time.

Celebration: Practice being grateful and thankful both in your own relationship with Christ and with other believers. Express encouragement and thankfulness to others.

Service: Give your time to the church and/or to others. Ponder tithing your time.

Prayer: Take deliberate steps to pray regularly and with purpose. Praying through the Psalms is a good way to increase your “prayer vocabulary.”

Fellowship: Hebrews 10:25, “Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Confession: Practice confessing your sins to trusted people who will pray with you and be spiritual allies.

Submission: Submit to the proper people in the proper ways—fight against the sin of pride. **Disciplines of Engagement** are intended to build the right kinds of attitudes and habits into our daily lives.

Ajith Fernando observed in *The Christian’s Attitude Toward World Religions*, “One who trusts in Christ alone will completely give up his idols, horoscopes, and other such practices of his old life that go against Christ’s Lordship. When a true believer is made aware of any area of his life that is not yielded to Christ, he will yield it. When he is made aware of a Christian principle to be followed, he will follow it whatever the cost. So when a new believer finds out that a follower of Christ should love his enemies, he will do so, even though that seems sheer folly in today’s society. When he finds out that

a follower of Christ cannot pay a bribe, he will stop paying bribes and pay dearly for it as far as his success in society is concerned. When he finds out that a follower of Christ treats both high and low caste people, both rich and poor people as equals, he will do so, however hard that may be for him.”

One should not read John 15 without hearing the invitation to be an intimate friend of Jesus and without being confronted by the fact that God has expectations for all of us that we will be fruitful if we are receiving the benefits of being “in” the vine and there are consequences if we are not. People who are seekers or new believers should be able to approach those of us who have been following Jesus for years and ask us about how God has transformed us. We should be able to tell others how we’ve been changed by Jesus. If we are the same angry, cranky, gossiping, unforgiving, bitter, selfish, or greedy person we were when we first became a Christian – something is terribly wrong. If we’re friends with Jesus, that friendship impacts us.

Jesus says, *“I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* “Jesus was and is a joyous, creative person. One of the most outstanding features of Jesus’ personality was precisely an abundance of joy. This he left as an inheritance to his disciples, *“that their joy might be full”* (John 15:11).” I believe we can experience the joy of Jesus. Happiness is fleeting and dependent upon our circumstances. The joy of Jesus is deeper and comes from our relationship with him. We experience the joy of Jesus by doing what he says – abiding in him, obeying him, loving him, serving him, enjoying the gift of our friendship with him that is cultivated by regularly practicing spiritual disciplines.

Prayer

Vine Jesus, help us, your branches to remain in you, to abide in your love, and to bear much fruit so that God may be glorified. And as we do so, please fill us with your joy, that we may share your joy with others. In Your name we pray, Amen.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. Why is abiding or remaining in Jesus “the vine” so important?
2. What do you think of Jesus’ statement that apart from him we “*can do nothing?*” What does that mean?
3. How do you respond to the idea that God has expectations for us being fruitful if we are receiving the benefits of being “in” the vine and that there are consequences if we are not bearing fruit?
4. Jesus says that those who are fruitful will be pruned for greater fruitfulness. If you are experiencing the knife of God, how do you know if you are being punished for unfruitfulness or pruned for greater service?
5. What spiritual disciplines are you in need of reprioritizing in your life (for example, prayer, Bible reading, reflection, solitude, silence, worship, etc)? How will you accomplish the goal of maintaining and practicing spiritual disciplines in your daily walk with Christ?
6. Jesus says, “*I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.*” How can engaging in spiritual disciplines help us to experience more of the joy of Jesus in our lives?

For further study:

Two excellent books on Spiritual Disciplines:

Richard Foster, *Celebration of Discipline*

Dallas Willard, *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*

List of Spiritual Disciplines from Richard Foster's book, *Celebration of Discipline*

1. The Inward Disciplines: Meditation, Prayer, Fasting, Study
2. The Outward Disciplines: Simplicity, Solitude, Submission, Service
3. The Corporate Disciplines (habits we engage in with other people)

Confession, Worship, Guidance, Celebration

Dallas Willard in his book *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* places the spiritual disciplines into two categories that are important. The first, "Disciplines of Abstinence," are designed to help us remove destructive and unhelpful things from our lives through acts that force us to stop, wait, remove, or eliminate.

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10.7.18 Congregational Prayer of Confession and Lament

Holy God there is much we lament in our nation. The bitter Supreme Court fight that reached a conclusion yesterday is merely the latest example of the partisanship, division, and distrust in our land that is causing so much anger and grief. We lament that we are seemingly living in different realities often shaped by where we live and by the different media through which we receive information. We lament that so many who are in positions of leadership are failing at being servant leaders. Rather than being concerned first and foremost for the “common welfare,” they seem bent on preserving power for themselves and getting re-elected with no desire, effort, or commitment to working with those of a different party for the good of all citizens and our nation’s present and future. We lament the hypocrisy which says it longs for collegiality while doing nothing to encourage or practice it. Dishonesty and lying are far too prevalent and have become far too accepted rather than a commitment to integrity and the truth. We are struggling with issues of race, gender, class, religion, ethnicity, identity, sex, violence, economics, education, and unending involvement in wars.

We pray for all victims of sexual assault and violence and we pray against those who disrespect, mistreat, or abuse any other person. We pray that new Supreme Court Justice, Brett Kavanaugh, will serve with impartiality and objectivity. We pray against the attitude that causes people to be angry that I prayed for both of those situations rather than just the one they support. Lord, have mercy upon us.

God we desperately need your help and we humbly cry out for it today. We pray to pursue a more godly path than insulting, demeaning, or even hating those with whom we disagree. May we cease from speaking in judgmental, emotionally charged ways like *“How could you even think such a thing? Don’t you see that..? That is so stupid! You clearly haven’t thought about this..”* Rather than belittling or attacking others may we ask questions like *“Why is this important to you? What led you to think that or to feel this way?”* Teach us all to listen intently to others without judgment and with genuine interest in what they believe and why. Enable us to acknowledge another’s point of view even if we don’t agree with it.

In today's contentious times where we're divided in so many ways, remind us, O God, how much we have in common. On this World Communion Sunday help us live with a clear understanding that we are all your children as are people of every race, nation, tribe, and language. We all have needs for food, shelter, education, health, safety, meaningful relationships, purpose, and love. We pray for this needy world of yours that you have called us to love and serve. We pray for Brazil, another nation that is polarized and divided, as they have their presidential election today.

Help each one of us to be the change we want and need to see in the world. Loving God inspire us to grow in our practice of empathy, compassion, justice, peace, generosity, and self-control. We ask all this so we and your church around the world may resemble more clearly and more fully the way of Christ in whose name we pray. Amen.