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April 28, 2024
Deuteronomy 6:10-12, Jeremiah 29:4-7 & John 15:1-9
Intertwined

Since Lent began in mid-February, we have been exploring the ministry of Jesus through the words of the Gospel of Luke (with a little detour in Matthew last week for our Earth Care service). What a journey it has been - through stories of feeding, the road into Jerusalem, through the last week of Jesus' life, the passion narrative, the empty tomb and the post-resurrection appearances, we have heard Jesus call to discipleship through the voice of Luke's call to radical invitation, welcome, and inclusion. This week and next week we will hear our call to discipleship through the voice of the gospel of John. John's gospel is known for having a "higher Christology" than the other gospels. This means there is a greater emphasis on the divinity of Jesus. In the Gospel of John, one way this divine nature is expressed is through a series of "I am" statements - these statements harken back to the revelation of God to Moses - a story we hear in Exodus chapter 3:

Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is God's name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I am who I am." and said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I am has sent me to you.'"

Remembering the words, God said to Moses, hear now these words from the Gospel of John chapter 15, the final of the seven "I am" statements made by Jesus:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. **This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.**

Each Saturday morning, with my subscription to *The Atlantic Magazine*, I receive a wonderful treat - an edition of *The Wonder Reader*, described as "a newsletter in which the editors recommend a set of stories to spark your curiosity and fill you with delight." Since I don't always have time - let's be real - rarely have time - to delve into the stories when they are sent, I save them in my email for that imagined, fantasy time when I will savor them over a delicious cup of tea. Well the ultimate irony happened last week, April 19 when *The Wonder Reader* collection was titled "How Being Busy Became a Status Symbol" subtitled "If time is a luxury,

why don't we flaunt it?" The introduction to the series of articles got my attention, with the author Isabel Fattal sharing this tidbit:

On our *How to Keep Time* podcast last year, co-host Becca Rashid shared an anecdote that has long stuck with me. "I was having lunch with a friend last weekend who was trying to organize a birthday party for her colleague," she began. "And, typical story, she said she was having trouble gathering everyone because everyone was too busy and it was impossible to get them to commit."

The unforgettable part is this: One person in the group apparently said that she couldn't make it because "she had to go to Crate & Barrel at 7 p.m. on a Friday." (Co-host Ian Bogost's response—"She had a flatware appointment?"—never fails to make me chuckle.) The anecdote is equal parts amusing and concerning: What has modern life come to if shopping for dishes must be scheduled in the same way that work meetings are? Today's newsletter explores the many different meanings of "I'm so busy," and what we miss when our focus is on being busy above all else.¹

My favorite article in the series is by author and social scientist Arthur Brooks, *How to Be Less Busy and More Happy*, whose subtitle "*If you feel too rushed even to read this, then your life could use a change*" grabbed my attention. There is much that I took from Brooks in this article, and I encourage you to check it out, but as I was sitting with our gospel passage for today, it was his discussion of the data suggesting that we are challenged by discretionary time (and thus subscribe to busyness) because of a fear of idleness.²

Now for those of us raised with the Protestant work ethic firmly entrenched in our brains and living in an achievement-oriented world, the idea of idleness aversion seems logical. Of course we are averse to idleness - wasn't sloth one of the seven deadly sins after all. We want to bear fruit - and the way we bear fruit is by work. And yet the command we get from Jesus in this passage from the 15th chapter of John is not to do more, be more, seek more. It is to abide in Jesus.

And Jesus said, "You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit."

And what precisely do we mean by abide? The Greek word translated as "abide" means simply "remain, stay, or dwell." The use of "abide" is a unique attribute of the Gospel of John, where it

¹Isabel Fattal. How Being Busy Became a Status Symbol "If time is a luxury, why don't we flaunt it?" *The Atlantic*. April 19, 2024; Online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/newsletters/archive/2024/04/how-being-busy-became-a-status-symbol/678147/>

² Arthur C. Brooks. How to Be Less Busy and More Happy. If you feel too rushed even to read this, then your life could use a change. *The Atlantic*. April 18, 2024; Online at <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2024/04/busyness-boredom-happiness-worklife/678085/>

is used 41 times. In contrast, it is used only 11 times in Matthew, Mark and Luke combined.³ Why does John tell us that Jesus instructed the disciples to abide in him?

John's gospel is the last of the four to be written, scholars suggest sometime between 80-100 CE. It has been 50 plus years since Jesus' death and resurrection. Divisions have popped up not just among the Jewish sects, but also among the followers of Jesus. A new generation of followers have emerged, well removed from Jesus' teachings and healings, and the signs of divinity that he shared. They have been influenced by the culture around them, particularly the Greek philosophies. As followers of Jesus should they separate from the world, or continue Jesus' ministry in the world?

Our scripture this morning comes in the middle of Jesus' instructions to the disciples about his impending departure. John chapters 13-17 are what is known as Jesus' farewell discourse. In a passage often shared on Maundy Thursday, Jesus washes the disciples' feet, before revealing that one of the disciples will betray him. Jesus tells the disciples that they will not be able to go with him where he is going and gives them a new commandment. They are to love one another. Jesus says, "Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another." In chapter 14, Jesus gives the disciples the promise of the Holy Spirit: "But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything and remind you of all that I have said to you. Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid; my spirit will abide with you."⁴

Abide. Remain. Dwell. Jesus is telling them, "I am the vine. My physical presence may be leaving you, but I will remain with you, if you remain with me. Abide in me. Do not fear. Do not be in crisis. I am not abandoning you. In reality, I will be even closer to you. We will be intertwined forever. There is no separation. We share a common life. I am the vine; you are the branches." As one commentator has noted, "The enduring connection with his disciples, Jesus insists, will be so organic and integral that separation is virtually unthinkable: the disciples' very lives will be signs of that connection, just as the life and fruit of a branch are signs of its ongoing connection to its vine."⁵

This particular imagery of interconnectedness to God through the vine and the fruit would have reminded the disciples of other words spoken in times of transition. Rebecca shared the words Moses spoke to the Israelites as they prepared to enter the Promised Land: when you inhabit

³ *Mounce Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, edited by William D. Mounce with Rick D. Bennett, Jr. Accessed through Accordance Bible Software. Version 13.3.4; OakTree Software; October 2022.

⁴ John 14:26-27; 14:17

⁵ Salt Project. Abide in Me: Salt Project's Commentary for Easter 5. Online at:

<https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/lectionary-commentary-for-easter-5>

cities that you did not build and enjoy fruits of the vineyards and olive groves that you did not plant, take care that you do not forget the Lord, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery. Likewise the Lord, through prophet Jeremiah, told those who were heading into exile that they should “build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat what they produce. ... seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare.”

Throughout scripture, when faced with an unknown future – with uncertainty about what the days ahead portend – the people are reminded that they are connected to each other and to God. When they abide in Jesus they are abiding in God the Father, and their lives are intertwined – past, present and future – and their lives bear fruit. And as our words of preparation remind us, “The vine branch doesn’t put ‘make grapes’ on its to-do list. It just makes them, because it’s part of the vine. And it never makes pears or avocados or olives—when we are connected to Jesus, we bear the fruit of Jesus.”⁶

We bear the fruit of Jesus. We bear the fruit of Jesus when we abide – when we sit and dwell in Jesus. And Jesus dwells in us – mutual indwelling. Jesus did not give the disciples a detailed to-do list of what they should do after he departs. He tells them that the fruit they will bear is love: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another. By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.” Next week we will hear his parting words to them about how to embody this love.

We are called to abide in the love of Jesus; to be intertwined body, mind and soul with Jesus. And when we do will bear Christ’s fruit in the world. For those of us averse to idleness, we can take heart. As Pastor Austin Shelly notes, “In the New Testament, to abide is to participate in an ongoing process of renewal through one’s presence intermingled with another’s; in biblical Greek, the word is active rather than passive. ... To abide one with another is to remain an active part of the whole community.”⁷

This is what we have been called to do for 60 years at PCO. To abide with God. To abide with each other. To love one another. To be the fruit. To be the church. Following our worship service this morning and birthday cake to celebrate our April birthdays, we will hear a report from the Journey to 2030 visioning team. The team is comprised of Jeff Arbour, Emily Conroy-Krutz (co-chairs), Catherine Holdway, Doug Paterson, and Matt Pearson. Through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, they have shaped the input from the town hall, congregation-wide survey and conversations with small groups into a vision statement of the fruit we will bear as we abide in the love of God through Jesus and the Holy Spirit. Jesus said, “I am the vine; you are the branches.” Come hear this morning the ways in which we will extend and intertwine our branches and bear the fruit of Jesus. Join me in prayer.

⁶Melissa Early, May 2, Easter 5B (John 15:1–8) The vine branch doesn’t put “make grapes” on its to-do list. It just makes them. *Christian Century*, April 21, 2021. Online at <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/may-2-easter-5b-john-15-1-8>

⁷ <https://www.christiancentury.org/lectionary/april-28-easter-5b-john-15-1-8-1-john-4-7-21>