

John 15: 1-8

A GRANDFATHER TOOK HIS 3-YEAR-OLD GRANDDAUGHTYER OUT FOR ICE-CREAM. AFTER PARKING HIS CAR AND LIFTING HER OUT OF HER CAR SEAT, THE GRANDFATHER OFFERED THE CHILD HIS THUMB. "YOU HAVE TO HOLD IT TIGHT UNTIL WE'RE INSIDE THE ICE CREAM SHOP, OKAY?" HE TOLD HER. "THIS IS A BUSY STREET." THE LITTLE GIRL TOOK ONE LOOK AT THE GRANDFATHER'S OUTSTRETCHED HAND, WRAPPED HER LEFT FIST AROUND HER OWN RIGHT THUMB, AND SAID, "NO, THANK YOU. I CAN HOLD MY OWN."

'NO, THANK YOU, I CAN HOLD MY OWN,' MIGHT BE THE PERFECT SLOGAN FOR WESTERN CHRISTIANITY. WE ARE PRODUCTS OF A CONTEMPORARY CULTURE THAT CELEBRATES THE INDIVIDUAL AND DISTRUSTS THE COMMUNAL. WE OFTEN REPRESENT THE CHRISTIAN LIFE AS A ONE-ON-ONE TRANSACTION BETWEEN A SINGLE BELIEVER AND THEIR GOD. "I ACCEPTED JESUS AS *MY* SAVIOR." WE PUT A LOT OF STOCK IN OUR PERSONAL SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCES: *MY* PRAYER LIFE, *MY* WORSHIP EXPERIENCE, *MY* CHURCH.

THOSE WHO DO ALIGN THEMSELVES WITH A LARGER CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY, GENERALLY DO SO WITH A CONSUMER MINDSET, TRUSTING THAT WE'RE FREE TO JOIN UP AND FREE TO QUIT AS PERSONAL PREFERENCE DICTATES. WE ARE, IN OTHER WORDS, PROUD LONE RANGERS. WE BELIEVE IN PULLING OURSELVES UP BY OUR OWN BOOTSTRAPS, AND ENCOURAGING OTHERS TO DO THE SAME. WE STRUGGLE NOT TO VIEW DEPENDENCE AS MORAL WEAKNESS. WE CHERISH OUR PERSONAL SPACE, AND FEEL SUFFOCATED WITH OTHER PEOPLE PRESS TOO CLOSE. WE BELIEVE, OF COURSE, IN LOVING OUR NEIGHBORS, BUT WE FEEL MOST COMFORTABLE LOVING THEM FROM A DISTANCE, OR AT LEAST WITH ONE EYE TRAINED ON THE NEAREST EXIT.

GIVEN THE CONTEXT OF OUR CULTURE, COULD THERE BE A MORE COUNTER-CULTURAL AND CHALLENGING VISION OF THE CHRISTIAN LIFE THAN THE ONE JESUS OFFERS IN TODAY'S GOSPEL: "I AM THE VINE, AND YOU ARE THE BRANCHES," HE TELLS HIS DISCIPLES. "THOSE WHO ABIDE IN ME AND I IN THEM BEAR MUCH FRUIT, BECAUSE APART FROM ME, YOU CAN DO NOTHING." AND IF THOSE WORDS ARE NOT BLUNT ENOUGH, HE CONTINUES: "WHOEVER DOES NOT ABIDE IN ME IS THROWN AWAY LIKE A BRANCH AND WITHERS; SUCH BRANCHES ARE GATHERED, THROWN IN THE FIRE, AND BURNED."

BURNED? YIKES...TIME TO SAY GOODBYE LONE RANGER AND WELCOME BRANCHES.

THIS IS JESUS'S METAPHOR FOR THE SPIRITUAL LIFE WHICH GOES AGAINST THE "I'LL DO IT MYSELF" MINDSET. WE ARE *MEANT* TO BE TANGLED UP TOGETHER. WE ARE MEANT TO LIVE LIVES OF PROFOUND INTERDEPENDENCE, GROWING INTO, AROUND, AND OUT OF EACH OTHER. WE CAUSE PAIN AND LOSS WHEN WE HOLD OURSELVES APART, BECAUSE THE FATE OF EACH INDIVIDUAL BRANCH AFFECTS THE VINE AS A WHOLE. IN THIS METAPHOR, DEPENDENCE IS NOT A MATTER OF PERSONAL MORALITY OR PREFERENCE; IT'S A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH—BRANCHES THAT REFUSE TO CLING TO THE VINE *DIE*.

FOR MANY THIS IS INCONVENIENT BECAUSE IT IMPLIES THAT OUR LIVES ARE NOT OUR OWN. THAT OUR CHOICES AFFECT PEOPLE WE DON'T EVEN KNOW. THAT WE ARE BOUND TO THE COMMUNITY OF GOD'S PEOPLE WHETHER SUCH BOUNDEDNESS SUITS ME OR NOT.

THE WORD 'ABIDE' IS THE KEY IN JESUS'S METAPHOR, APPEARING 8 TIMES IN OUR GOSPEL READING. IF GOD IS THE VINEGROWER, JESUS IS THE VINE, AND WE ARE THE BRANCHES, WHAT SHOULD WE DO? WE HAVE ONLY ONE TASK: *TO ABIDE*. TO STAY, TO CLING, TO REMAIN, TO DEPEND, TO RELY, TO LAST, TO PERSEVERE, TO COMMIT, TO CONTINUE, TO ENDURE, TO ACCEPT. TO HANG IN THERE FOR THE LONG HAUL. TO MAKE OURSELVES AT HOME.

IT'S A TRICKY WORD. PASSIVE ON ONE HAND, AND ACTIVE ON THE OTHER. TO ABIDE IS TO STAY ROOTED IN PLACE. BUT IT IS ALSO TO GROW, TO CHANGE, TO MULTIPLY. IT'S A VULNERABLE-MAKING VERB: IF WE ABIDE; WE'LL GET PRUNED. IT'S A RISKY VERB: IF WE ABIDE, WE'LL BEAR FRUIT THAT OTHERS WILL SEE AND TASTE. IT'S A HUMBLING VERB: IF WE ABIDE, WE'LL HAVE TO ACCEPT NOURISHMENT THAT IS NOT OF OUR OWN MAKING. AND IT'S A RELENTLESSLY COMMUNAL VERB-IF WE ABIDE, WE WILL HAVE TO COEXIST WITH OUR FELLOW BRANCHES. WE WILL HAVE TO LIVE A LIFE THAT IS MESSY, CROWDED, TANGLED, AND GORGEOUS. A LIFE THAT IS DEEPLY ROOTED AND WILDLY FERTILE.

I WONDER IF JESUS'S FOLLOWERS FOUND THE METAPHOR OF THE VINE EASY TO APPLY IN DAILY LIFE? SEEMS ESPECIALLY CHALLENGING TODAY. WE LIVE IN BITTERLY DIVIDED TIMES. WE HAVE GOOD REASONS TO BE CAUTIOUS AND SELF-PROTECTIVE. IT'S HARD IN OUR SELF-PROMOTING CULTURE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO CONFESS THAT WE ARE LOST AND LIFELESS ON OUR OWN. THAT OUR STRENGTH LIES IN SURRENDER, NOT SELF-SUFFICIENCY.

EQUALLY HARD FOR MANY IS THE LEAP THEY MUST MAKE IN ORDER TO TRUST THE METAPHOR AT ALL. AS IN REALLY? JESUS REALLY ISN'T JUST A WISE TEACHER? A GOOD ROLE MODEL? A HISTORICAL FIGURE? HE'S REALLY THE VERY SOURCE AND SUSTAINER OF LIFE?

THE GRANDFATHER AND HIS SON HAD A GOOD LAUGH OVER THE LITTLE GIRL'S ATTEMPT AT INDEPENDENCE WHEN HE BROUGHT HER HOME FROM THEIR ICE CREAM OUTING. NEEDLESS TO SAY, THE GRANDFATHER DIDN'T ALLOW HIS THREE-YEAR-OLD GRANDDAUGHTER TO HOLD HER OWN HAND WHILE CROSSING THE STREET. HE TOLD HER SHE HAD TO GRASP HIS THUMB, OR ELSE MISS OUT ON THE ICE CREAM. IN TYPICAL TODDLER FASHION, THE CHILD THREW A TANTRUM, WAITED FOR A FEW MINUTES TO SEE IF HER GRANDPA WOULD RELENT (WHICH HE DIDN'T), AND FINALLY GRABBED HOLD OF HIS HAND, NOT LETTING GO UNTIL SHE GOT HER ICE CREAM.

WOULDN'T IT BE WONDERFUL IF WE COULD SURRENDER OUR FEROCIOUS INDEPENDENCE WITH NO MORE THAN A QUICK TANTRUM? IF ONLY WE WOULD CONSENT TO SEE REALITY AS IT TRULY IS: NOT THAT JESUS IS SITTING AROUND WAITING FOR US TO GET ORGANIZED, BUT THAT HE HAS ALREADY STARTED NOURISHING THE WORLD THROUGH US. "I AM THE VINE," HE TOLD HIS DISCIPLES. "YOU ARE THE BRANCHES." IT'S A DONE DEAL. MEANING THAT WHETHER WE LIKE IT OR NOT, OUR LIVES ARE BOUND UP IN HIS AND IN EACH OTHER'S. BREXLEE'S LIFE IS NOW BOUND UP IN OURS AND OURS IN HERS. THE ONLY TRUE LIFE WE WILL LIVE IN THIS WORLD IS THE LIFE WE CONSENT TO LIVE IN RELATIONSHIP, MESSY AND ENTANGLED THOUGH IT MIGHT BE.

YES, IT'S DIFFICULT. BUT IT'S ALSO EASY. REMEMBER: OUR VINE IS TRUE AND OUR VINEGROWER IS SKILLED. THIS IS WHAT WE WERE MADE FOR. ABIDE.

GOD IS ALWAYS UP TO SOMETHING. GOD IS THE BUSY, ACTIVE GARDENER WHO CLEARS THE FIELD AND REMOVES THE STONES. HE CONSTRUCTS THE TRELLISES AND PLANTS THE SEEDS. HE INSPECTS THE PLANTS AND PULLS THE WEEDS. AND, MOST OF ALL, GOD IS GOOD. GOD IS THE GOOD GARDENER WHO CARES FOR HIS VINE.

AND OUR TASK? ABIDE. REMAIN, STAY, CLING, DEPEND, RELY, PERSEVERE, COMMIT, CONTINUE. THIS IS WHAT WE WERE MADE FOR. TO ABIDE. AMEN.