

*Texts: Psalm 15; John 15:1-8*

*Subject: Jesus the True Vine*

*Theme: The Dude Abides*

Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, September 5, 2021; *Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas, NV*

Grace and peace to you from God our Father in heaven and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

We've been talking about *generosity* these last few weeks, and have heard of God's promise to provide for all our needs, freeing us to serve others, freedom from worry and fear of scarcity, making us generous, and our generous God who gives us the Son, our flesh and blood savior. John's gospel paints another picture of the God who sustains us in Jesus, the true vine. Who calls us to abide in him as he abides in us. To abide is to *stay, to remain, to live and to dwell with*.

In the classic 1998 film, *The Big Lebowski*, we meet "The Dude," who after a case of mistaken identity is the victim of a home invasion. His beloved rug is soiled and he longs just to return to his worry-free existence of bowling, driving around, and spending time with his friends Walter and Donny. These events force him into the role of an ersatz private investigator, in an effort to find the estranged wife of the 'other' Jeffery Lebowski. Along the way, the Dude is watched and admired from a distance by another character, called 'the stranger,' who upon meeting at the bar at the local bowling alley remarks, "Take it easy, Dude," to which comes the response, "yeah well, The Dude abides." The Dude abides.

One of the many lessons we can find in the film is a reassurance that as we persist and persevere in struggles, stand up for what's right, and care for one another, we will find peace, and when all else fails, go bowling. The Dude abides, because that's what the Dude does. He exists, before the events of the story, not unaware, but

unconcerned with the weight and worry of the world. He is not employed (though he was at one time a roadie for Metallica). He is unbothered, and yet is sustained by the goodness of those around him. He participates in life as a friend, an advocate for environmental justice, and lives in a perpetual flow state. The Dude abides.

Jesus here in John's gospel is saying farewell to his friends. He's headed to Jerusalem, to the cross. He will die and be raised up again for the life of the world. He calls those who will listen in close. Jesus says, he is the vine, and the Father is the vinegrower, who cares for the vine itself, and in turn the branches. It's an image that was well known in Israel, (three thousand years of beautiful tradition, from Moses to Sandy Koufax...) that saw themselves as the vine planted and watered by God (Ps. 80, Isa.5, Ezek.15). Jesus continues the metaphor by calling his followers to abide in him, to remain focused on him, and to bear fruit and be disciples.

What fruit? We tend to think that to bear fruit is to prosper financially, or to make more Christians. We think of fruit as gain, but fruit is also food, the necessities of life for those who pass by the vine, who are fed, who take what is needed, and who find life in what the vine provides. Dr. James Boyce of Luther Seminary connects this reading to the previous chapter, and Jesus' promise to prepare "dwelling places" (Jn. 14.6) - *mone* in Greek, from the same root as *meno* "to abide" to this image of the vine as our home here on earth. It *is* our dwelling place. The fruit of the vine, the abiding love of God in the living Jesus is generously given to us here and now. Here we taste it - we ingest it. We come to this table to eat and drink of it, are grafted onto the vine of Israel, adopted into the embrace of God the vinegrower, who nurtures and cares for us, and welcomes us into the family and mission of Jesus. When we bear fruit, we are fed too. We are

nourished by the Holy Spirit - the love of God, and she drives us, compels us, and calls us to share that with our friends and neighbors we meet, to speak words of truth and justice, to abide with one another as the body of Christ.

To abide is to keep Jesus' commandments, primarily, to love God, and love one another. We are to listen and share and love and give and serve. These things bear fruit. We are loved and saved by God who has reconciled us through the cross of Christ. This good news gives our lives meaning, and the actions that bloom from us are not our works but fruits of the Spirit in us. They grow and spread and green up and sprout branches of their own. They grow out of Christ's abiding, they germinate from the vine and are carried out by the branches.

As we look around, we can see plenty of people worried and wondering and anxious and arguing about every single thing. Our world seems to be in rough shape. People want to know if this is the end - the unraveling of our reality and the *apocalypse* of biblical proportions. We have seen storms and flooding and fires and war. These things have always happened. We are bombarded by it now, on TV and social media and families are divided over medical choices, political stances, and religion too. Apocalypse means *to uncover or to reveal*. We shouldn't fear that. We're going through a difficult time in this nation and across the world. But what is being revealed? What are you learning? How will we grow as a collective humanity through these many trials?

Some are finding a deeper spiritual life. Some are changing careers to work on issues that make a difference and really matter to them. Some are changing relationships and opening up about who they really are. Some are prioritizing their

service to others, or mental health and rest. The world is changing and so are we, and we can be worried by what will be left behind. We wonder.

When our world seems to be falling apart, where is our God? God is where God has always promised to be. Present. Near. Dwelling. Abiding. Even as we face uncertainties and we try to figure things out, we trust that God near. Not just with us, but with those with whom we disagree. We are all facing some struggle some pain, some confusion, and yet we are not alone. We are still one body of Christ. We are still one people. Jesus promises to be present in our questions and our suffering - that means with women who have to make tough choices about carrying a child or having an abortion. Christ abides with our service members and veterans as well as with with women and girls and families and workers in Afghanistan facing the peril of Taliban rule. Christ abides with anti-maskers and anti-vaxxers, and those who have lost mothers and fathers and sons and daughters to COVID-19, with teachers struggling to do their job and students facing the threat of school shootings and dwindling resources. Christ abides with firefighters and police officers putting their lives on the line to protect homes and lives and businesses. Christ abides with young black men who find themselves pushed aside, suspected, victimized and demonized by law enforcement and our culture at large. Christ abides with lesbian and gay and bisexual and queer and trans folx who are discriminated against as they persevere and share their gifts in the world.

The Dude abides. Christ abides with us, even to the end of the age.

Christ abides in us and with us. This changes us - it makes us new. Mark Allan Powell writes that "The grace of God makes us gracious"<sup>1</sup> God's generosity makes us generous. It leads us as we abide with one another. For this reason we are called to be

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<sup>1</sup> Powell, Mark Allan. *Giving to God* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2006), 125.

generous with our love and service, with our time and money, with our gentleness and our joy. It makes a difference.

We don't do it by our own power, but we are nourished from the true vine. We are empowered by a spirit from God who gives us strength when we feel weak. Who gives us what we need to grow and go and be and believe and persist, even in our questions and disagreements. The branches abide on the vine. The branches that are filled and fed and remain are productive, and grow the big, juicy, fruit. If they do not, they are without sustenance, without life, they dry up and fade away. When we do not abide in him, Jesus makes clear what happens. The branches that do not take nourishment from the vine, who cannot or will not become disciples, are turning from that which gives life, that which sustains, seeking to be fed elsewhere. They may find what they are seeking, but will it last? The true food that gives life to the world comes from the one who is the true vinegrower.

As followers and disciples of Jesus, the true vine, we can trust that we have been generously given all we need. His great love bears fruit in us, and we go to share it with the world. Believe, trust, love, share, remain in Christ and the fruit will come. He is the vine and you are the branches.

Christ is with you. The Dude abides. Amen.