

The Message for Feb 19, 2012

John 15:1-11

Live It

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Today we finish our seven-week worship series called, “Over the Fence – Living the love of God.” Today we focus on the theme “Live it!” We are to live the love of God wherever we go. Sharing it in exciting ways as baptized disciples of Jesus – it is our duty and our delight to share our blessings over the fence with our neighbors.

In our reading today we hear how God is the great gardener, Jesus in the vine, and we the branches. It’s a great image. It’s an image people can relate to. Jesus says to his disciples, *“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.”* How true! And I’m speaking from personal experience.

The key word is “abide.” Jesus repeats it eight times in this text. It’s not a word that we tend to use with any regularity. I would not say to Amber, my wife, “I’m going to abide here in the recliner and watch football.” We don’t use that word. To abide means “to remain,” or, “to stay with,” or “stay connected.” It’s a relational word.

Jesus is encouraging us eight times in these 11 verses to stay connected to him. He says that we can’t go it alone in life. Just as a branch cannot live and bear fruit disconnected from the vine, neither can we. We cannot live apart from Jesus. Of course, society says that we can. Society says we can do any thing we want on our own and be successful without the help of others but that’s a lie. We can’t.

Those who are mature in the faith realize that we need Jesus and he needs us. Jesus needs us. He is counting on us. He needs us to stay connected to him and bear his good fruit in the world.

Growing up my father grew all kinds of things in our back yard, our ½ acre, in the borough of Bedford. 2/3 of our borough property was a garden. Along the path to the chicken coup – we raised chickens at the end of our lot – there is nothing like fresh eggs for breakfast. Along the path to the chicken coup were a few apple trees, a pear tree, walnut trees, as well as an asparagus patch, a rhubarb patch (I can taste that rhubarb even as I talk about it), and a strawberry patch. On the other side of the garden were four or five large Concord grapevines. Oh those grapevines produce these big, sweet, juicy grapes. I’m convinced that my dad could grow anything.

My job as a teenager was to mow the lawn. It was something I enjoyed doing most of the time. Except around those grapevines because you had to be careful cutting the grass around them and between them and the garden, lest you mow over something you shouldn’t. Which I had a habit of doing, “oh that was a tomato plant I just ran over?”

One time I got a little careless and I backed into one of the grapevines and broke one of the branches. It wasn't broken off completely so I figured it was okay. A few days later I checked to see how the grapes were doing on that broken branch and they had turned into raisins. That's the day I learned that a branch cannot live and bear fruit disconnected from the vine.

That's what Jesus is saying about us and our relationship with him, apart from Jesus we cannot live or bear fruit. Apart from Jesus our fruit dries up and becomes bitter or sour or rotten and raisin-like. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must abide in the vine. We must remain connected to Jesus.

How do **we** stay connected to Jesus? How do **you** stay connected to Jesus?

I use the APTAT method. APTAT is not a word. It's an acronym A-P-T-A-T. By itself it means nothing. It's the first letter of five-word-process for staying connected to Jesus. I do this often, many times without even thinking about it. I do this before every challenge to stay connected. I use this method every Sunday for preaching and leading worship.

A – admit. Admit that you can do nothing without Jesus no matter what. Alone we are sure to fail. With Jesus anything is possible.

P – pray. Pray for God's help no matter what the situation. Prayer works. Turn to God for help.

T – trust. Trust in the promise Jesus made to you from the cross. He paid the price for your life in this world and the next. Trust that you are free from sin to live without fear. Trust that you are a forgiven sinner.

A – Act. You got to act. You can't just lie in bed waiting for God to act for you. You got to get up and go to work or school. To make that hard phone call, you have to dial the number. To have that hard conversation with someone, you have to go to them.

So... you've admitted you can't do it alone.
 You've cried out in prayer for help.
 You've trusted in the promise from Jesus that God will come through for you and be with you.
 You act and it goes better than you thought it would.

T – Thank. Thank Jesus. Nobody knows what you have done or better yet what Jesus has done through you because you abide in him. But you know. You stayed connected to him though it all.

The APTAT method works. It keeps us connected to Jesus so that we can share our blessings with others no matter what the situation.

Our mission statement uses the key words – *Gather, Grow, and Go*.

I was talking with an older member who said to me, “You know pastor I have been a life-long Lutheran and I have trouble with this discipleship language. I have no problem with the *gathering* and *growing* part. I have a problem with the *going* part. I don’t feel right going out there into the world to share.”

WOW! Here is someone who is open and honest about his fears. So we talked about that. We talked about what it means to live by faith in the church and in the world. We talked about what it means to be a blessing to others. He said, “Pastor what you are really talking about is evangelism and I’m not comfortable with that.” He was right on both accounts.

Perhaps we need to redefine evangelism. First we need to realize why we go and evangelize. We go because we are blessed by God to be a blessing to others. Say that with me. *We are blessed by God to be a blessing to others.*

When we fail to produce good fruits, when we fail to share our blessings with others, Jesus says pruning will happen. Jesus says, *the gardener cuts off every branch that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.* The goal is to produce fruit, fruit that will last, fruit that is shared. By the way did you notice that every branch get’s pruned?

My dad would go wild pruning those concord grapevines. To watch him you would think he enjoyed it. Truth is he said it hurts the plant to prune it but it’s necessary. And the branches he cut off would be burned in the garden. That was the fun part for me.

Pruning increases the quality and quantity of the produce. At the end of every growing season my dad would prune those grapevines to where practically nothing left but the vine and few twigs. With a smile on his face he would proclaim with certainty, “Next year the grapes will be even bigger and sweeter and juicer.” And they were.

I wonder - what does God need to prune from our lives? What needs cut out of our lives so that the quality and quantity of the fruit we produce here at Friedens is even better?

I’m sure you know what needs to be pruned from your life. Maybe it’s greed or a grudge or gossip or gluttony or selfishness or laziness or a lack of acceptance or a lack of forgiveness. Ask God right now to prune it out of your life... to prune whatever is preventing you from sharing your blessings with others. Ask God to remove it right now.

Let us pray... God prune away whatever is preventing our evangelism efforts here in this grapevine called Friedens. Amen.

Now evangelism. What comes to mind when you hear me say the word – “evangelism.”

- * A bullhorn?
- * A “Repent” sign?
- * Somebody standing on the street corner yelling, “turn or burn.”

It’s a 2,000 year old practice that has produced some bad fruit over the years. And yet, Jesus is counting on us to go and share - to go and evangelize. So here are the five good fruits of evangelism:

FIRST: Evangelism shouts joy, not judgment. The word evangelism means “to bring Good News.” We are good news people, not bad news people. We have good news to share with a smile on our face and a twinkle in our eyes. Like telling a friend the lottery ticket he/she purchased is the big winner or sharing with a cancer-ridden family member that scientists have discovered the cure. Jesus wants his joy to be complete in us.

SECOND: Evangelism is for everyone. We often think of Billy Graham or his son, Franklin, and others like them, to be evangelists, but not us. And yet, everyone one of us is to share the good news with family, friends, neighbors, co-workers, and classmates. As one pastor put it, *“The first reformation took place when the Word of God got into the hands of the common people. The second reformation will take place when the work of God gets into the hands of the common people.”*

THIRD: Evangelism is a love story, not a hate speech. God loves you. No questions asked. That’s the message of evangelism. That’s the story we live by. It’s a love story and it’s for everyone.

FOURTH: Evangelism offers meaning. People are looking for meaning in their lives and evangelism offers it. The other day I asked my son, “Why are we here?” He said, “To live on the earth and do God’s will.” He gets it. At 9-years-old he gets it. Many people would love to get it. So they can live it.

FIFTH: Evangelism is the means to share Jesus with others. We are living in very anxious times. People are chronically anxious because the world is changing at a rapid pace. People are in desperate need of a relationship with Jesus and the life he offers to gain some stability during these anxious times. Jesus can address any need that people have.

We gather, we grow, and we go to live the faith. So go and be a blessing to others. Go, the world is hungry for the fruit of God’s love. As Thomas Aquinas put it - go and share the gospel and use words only if you have to. Amen.