

John 15:1-11

‘I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. 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. 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. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

A Little Time in the Wilderness Can’t Hurt

Here we are at the beginning of Lent. It’s the beginning of the long stretch before Easter, when we’re supposed to take down the hallelujahs, give up the desserts and eat a lot of fish, avoid extravagance spending, and read a daily devotional. Has anyone besides me fallen behind on your reading? This is a season when many Christians are more solemn than usual. I thought of how solemn we get as I was looking at a lot of faces on Ash Wednesday, telling them “From dust you came; to dust you’ll return.” (Thanks, Pastor! That’s a cheery thought.) This is the season when we’re not only reminded of all of Jesus’ commandments that we’re supposed to follow; we’re also reminded that we fail so often to follow them. As we approach Holy Week with Maundy Thursday and Good Friday we remember how the disciples really let Jesus down, betraying him and abandoning him to death on a cross, and we humbly admit that we don’t serve him much better than they did. So we look forward to Easter when we can shed the sackcloth and ashes, remember that Jesus rose from the dead. All’s well that ends well, right?

Well not exactly. Because Jesus was not just someone who lived, died, and resurrected two thousand years ago, someone who has no impact on our lives here and now. We call him “Lord” and “Master, and his death and resurrection should have profound impact on **our** lives. Rev. Eric Wilner-Write puts it very succinctly in a prayer:

Lord, your wondrous birth means *nothing* unless we are born again,
Your death and sacrifice mean *nothing* unless we die to sin,
Your resurrection means *nothing* if you be risen alone.

While the Church has reason to celebrate Jesus’ resurrection, we have yet to celebrate the full realization of God’s kingdom on earth as it is in heaven, and you and I are not just passive observers, members of the studio audience just sitting back and enjoying the show. We are participants in God’s plan; we are laborers in the vineyard. Quite simply we are disciples preparing the way for his return, and we have a lot to do.

And Lent is a good opportunity for us to spend extra time focusing on God. Lent is not a time for us to beat ourselves up for our failures, but to build our relationship with God, spending extra time in prayer and meditation, reading scripture, fasting. It's a good time for us to give up certain indulgences, and recognize those things that get in our way of a healthy relationship with God. And today I want to emphasize that the most obvious sign of a healthy relationship with God is JOY. I wonder if we've forgotten that, or if we've lost the joy that should be the mark of a Christian. I don't mean an artificial joy, a superficial joy. I don't mean the polite smile, the "church face" that we put on during social hour. I mean a deep-rooted and abiding joy that comes from a deep-rooted and abiding relationship with the true God, a joy that makes you want to invite everyone to the party, a joy that sustains you through all the trials and tribulations that life hands you. An undefeatable joy!

It's not a joy that results from blissful ignorance or indifference; we don't close our eyes to the bigotry and hatred and violence that plague our world. In fact our relationship with God heightens our awareness of evil and the suffering of others. But we're able to sustain our joy nonetheless because we know that God triumphs over all of this. We *believe* in a new heaven and a new earth. We *believe* that we have eternal life in Jesus Christ and that nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. And such assurance does not come from repeating creeds week after week; it comes from a passionate spiritual relationship with the true God, and *that* relationship is built on prayer and fasting and studying Scripture and fellowship. It comes from a genuine relationship with the Living God.

To share a little story from the Methodist faith tradition, John Wesley was once a young Anglican Priest who felt a calling to what the people of his day called "The New World" and inspire the somewhat worldly colonists to live lives of piety and faith, and to convert the native population to Christianity as well. Spoiler alert: he failed at both. In 1735 Wesley embarked for America on a ship carrying a number of German passengers who happened to be Moravians. While in passage the ship encountered a severe storm. Wesley himself was scared for his life, as were all the English passengers, but Wesley notes that during the height of the storm, with waves crashing on the deck and water pouring into the lower decks, the Moravians sang hymns. Not even the children cried, for as one the Moravian Bishop explained to Wesley, *they knew they were going to a Father who loves them and they knew Jesus as their Savior*. Can we keep singing and dancing even when the waves are crashing over the bows of our own spiritual ships? Of course we can, because we know that we rest secure in the arms of loving God! But John Wesley didn't yet know that. He didn't feel that. He was afraid of the storm, and he was afraid of death, and he was afraid of death because he did not have the kind of faith that those Moravians had. His mission to the New World ended in failure, and he returned to England a rather broken man, doubting his own ability to preach the gospel. It was only after John Wesley got to know Jesus a little better. He reluctantly went to a prayer meeting where he got to know Jesus a little bit better. Wesley write that he felt assured that Jesus had taken his sins, even his, and saved him from the law of sin and death. And so Wesley lost his fear and got a taste of that joy that comes from knowing the grace of God that is born out of his love.

Which makes me wonder just how tempted Jesus was in the Wilderness. Our lectionary reading for this Sunday is about Jesus spending forty days in the Wilderness, and the Bible doesn't tell us a lot about what happened during those forty days – just that he was visited by Satan toward the end of that period, and that Satan *tempted* Jesus, but to be tempted you have to want whatever it is that being waved in front of you. Did Jesus want to change a stone into bread? Did he want to test God by throwing himself off the pinnacle of the temple? Did Jesus want all the splendors of the world? I really doubt it. I think Jesus saw that vanity that drives people like us to strive for fame and fortune and glory and honor, but I think he saw just how unfulfilling all those things were. I think Jesus understood that we are fulfilled only by God, in relationship with God, and the only thing that really matters is doing God's will and serving God as he leads us to plant seeds for his kingdom.

His kingdom. Christians have gotten this wrong time and time again. We've mistaken our own kingdoms for the true kingdom, building walls to exclude those who don't think the way we do or act within the bounds of what we consider "appropriate" Christian behavior. We the Church have instigated violence against millions of God's children who don't conform to our particular mindset. We take God's love and grace and we attempt to distribute it as WE see fit, withholding it from those who diverge from our narrow theologies and biblical interpretations. We have forgotten that the Church belongs not to us but to Jesus, who is alive and well and building his kingdom in this world. And sometimes the Church facilitates that kingdom, and sometimes it interferes with it.

Because we as Christians are prone to temptation. We are prone to end our fasts before their completed. We are prone to be enticed by all the "BLING" and all the splendor of the world. But Jesus enjoyed such a close relationship with the Father that nothing could replace his desire to serve God. And by the time Satan came to tempt Jesus those temptations were not really temptations at all because Jesus had by that time so solidified his relationship to the Father that it would hardly cross his mind to do anything that ran against the will of the Father. You can't tempt someone with something they're not interested in. And Lent is a time for us to build our relationship with God to the same degree, to the point where only the will of God matters to us.

But we're not there yet, are we? Satan comes and tempts us to trust in ourselves rather than God, to glorify and trust in ourselves rather than the One who has and continues to supply our every need. We'd like to think that we're faithful disciples of Jesus, that we resist every temptation to grab that last piece of fried chicken on the platter, or to turn that spotlight a little more in our direction, to see ourselves as slightly more important than the "average" person, slightly more deserving of power or recognition or any of the things that come with money, like a newer car or the boat you've always wanted, or maybe just a few more channels on our 60 inch flat screen TV. No, we resist all those temptations, don't we? Maybe we do, but some temptations are not so easy to resist, are they? Some temptations force us to fall on our knees and pray that God would give us the strength to look the other way. And some temptations lead us to make a thorough investigation of Scripture...looking for some verse, ANY verse that will somehow justify the course we want to take, and the more our minds are set in our ways the more theological we become in our attempt to justify the direction we are dead set on taking. Hey, at least we're reading our Bibles, right?

Which is why it's a good thing to spend some time in the Wilderness with God. We need to really lay ourselves bare before God, to let him expose all our hidden biases and prejudices, our hidden pride, our fears, and our insecurities, because if our relationship with God remains shallow we will find ourselves pursuing our own agendas in Jesus' name, and doing more harm to the Church than good. We need to deepen our relationship with God, you can't be tempted by something you have no interest in. We had a movie night at our church to celebrate the Academy Awards – as faithful Methodists we had a potluck dinner beforehand – and someone brought caviar. Elegant! Splendid! But no matter how you spread caviar on the finest cracker or wafer you can buy, you could not tempt me with caviar. I've had it, and I think once was more than enough for me. Maybe you like it, but if Satan tempted me with all the caviar in the world I could honestly say that I would laugh hysterically in Satan's face. If something doesn't entice us, it won't tempt us.

I don't believe Jesus went through his time in the Wilderness in misery, constantly wishing for something to eat, constantly fearing wild animals; I think he had a great time in communion with the Father, as we have when we spend time in solitude with God. I don't think Jesus went through his ministry of healing and teaching and proclaiming the good news having any regrets or thinking, "Gee, I'm pretty good at this. Maybe I *could* live in a palace or have a nicer wardrobe, and maybe a vacation home in Sidon." I think Jesus was so committed to the will of the Father that he never thought about wealth or power or glory, or perhaps even his own hunger and thirst. He was THAT committed to the Father, yet his commitment was not a burden. It was a pleasure! It was a joy!

I sometimes try to imagine what my life was like before I was introduced to the Christian faith. I grew up in the church, so I would have started processing our faith from a very early age, I would have heard stories read to me from the Bible. But if I hadn't been so exposed to the faith and I just read the New Testament for my first time, I would consider it perhaps best news I had ever heard, the happiest book – or collection of books – that I had ever read; the story of a world that is broken in so many ways, a world that God enters in the flesh, bringing healing and life eternal life to those who abide in Christ as he abides in us...eternally. What is there not to like about this story? Christ has initiated the kingdom of God on earth, and we dwell therein, with Christ, enveloped by the love of God. What could make us more ecstatic?

Toward the end of his second farewell address to his disciples in the book of John Jesus says, "I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete." Of all the ways that our faith transforms our lives, the feature that should distinguish a Christian most from any other person should be JOY.

I believe Jesus was the most joyful man alive. Sure he had to deal with a lot of angry people, but he also attended luncheons and dinner parties...and probably a few potluck dinners. I think that anyone who knew Jesus knew that he was the happiest person alive. In fact it bothered a lot of folks – the Pharisees and John the Baptist to name a few. But that's the mark of a life that is bound up in God: JOY.

Lent is our time in the Wilderness, but it's not a time to be dreary. I actually love the wilderness. I've spent vacation time in many a national park either alone or with a single companion, and I

relish the solitude, knowing of course that it's not really solitude as long as there is a God yearns for you as much as you yearn for him. You should probably carry bear spray in case your joyful communion with God is interrupted by a less peaceful presence, but look upon Lent as a joyful time to draw *even closer to God*. So whatever you abstain from, whatever fast you decide to observe, any extra time you spend in prayer and scripture study, REMEMBER, THE POINT IS TO DRAW CLOSER TO GOD. The closer you draw to God, the greater your joy, and the greater your joy, the less tempted you'll be to do anything that takes you away from the arms of a loving God.