

March 12, 2017
Rev. Christine Tiller Bohn, Ph.D.
Timber Ridge Presbyterian Church, Greeneville, TN
Scripture citations from NIV (unless otherwise indicated)

John 15:9-17
Abiding

In verse 16 of John chapter 15, Jesus says, “You did not choose me, but I chose you.”

Jesus declared to his inner circle of followers—Peter and James and John and Andrew and the rest: You did not choose me, but I chose you.

The same message applied to all who knew and loved Jesus during his time on earth—Mary Magdalene and Joanna and Salome and Cleopas and Joseph of Arimathea and the rest: You did not choose me, but I chose you.

The same message applied to Augustine of Hippo, Ignatius of Antioch, Hildegard of Bingen, and Mother Teresa: You did not choose me, but I chose you.

The same message applies to the house church in China and underground believers in North Korea: You did not choose me, but I chose you.

The same message applies to us: You did not choose me, but I chose you.

Do you ever wonder if you are worthy to be a disciple of Jesus? It doesn't matter; you were not chosen because of your worthiness, but because God's love embraces you and God's plan for the redemption of all creation involves you.

Do you ever wonder if you have enough knowledge to be a disciple of Jesus? It doesn't matter; you were not chosen because of your knowledge, but because God's love embraces you and God's plan for the redemption of all creation involves you.

Do you ever wonder if you are strong enough or capable enough to be a disciple of Jesus? It doesn't matter; you were not chosen because of your strength or your capabilities, but because God's love embraces you and God's plan for the redemption of all creation involves you.

Do you ever wonder if you are good enough—just plain good enough—to be a disciple of Jesus? It doesn't matter; you were not chosen because of your goodness, but because God's love embraces you and God's plan for the redemption of all creation involves you.

God's love embraces you. God's plan for the redemption of all creation involves you. God's love never wavers. God's plan is sure and certain.

"I am the true vine," Jesus said, "and my Father is the gardener. ... I am the vine; you are the branches." You and I are not a grape vine branches because we are worthy or knowledgeable or capable or good. We are grape vine branches because God's love abounds. "You did not choose me, but I chose you."

Jesus says that two things make it possible for a branch to be fruitful: 1) the branch needs to be connected to the vine, and 2) the branch needs to be pruned regularly.

The pruning—that's the gardener's responsibility. Since pruning tends to be a rather uncomfortable experience, it is perhaps helpful if the branch understands that pruning is necessary and helpful. Since we branches are usually not particularly fond of discomfort, it is helpful if we trust deep down that pruning is an act of love and a demonstration of the attentiveness and care of the gardener. We branches are not plants but human beings with the ability to make choices of our own, so we can (and sometimes we do) struggle against the pruning and render it less effective. Still, pruning is the responsibility of the gardener.

The being connected to the vine--intimately and organically so that we draw our nourishment from the vine—that, it seems, has a lot to do with our choices and actions.

Jesus says to his followers: "Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me." That's the NIV translation. It uses the word "remain," but that is way too dry of a word. The idea here is much more organic than that, much more relational, much more intimate. The Message puts it this way: "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you. In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me." The NRSV has a good translation: "Abide in me, as I abide in you. Just as a branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me."

If we remain connected to the vine, so that we are nourished by the vine and given life by the vine, so that we are with Jesus and immersed in his word, then we will bear fruit. Stay connected with Jesus—abide with him, make a home in him, be immersed in him—and fruit happens. We will produce. We will do that for which we were chosen, and our fruit-bearing will give glory to God.

If we do not remain connected to the vine, and we are not nourished by the vine and given life by the vine, and we are not with Jesus and immersed in his word, then we will not bear fruit. We will dry up. We will wither. We will die.

Notice: Fruit-bearing is not a reward, and withering is not a punishment. Fruit-bearing is what branches do when they are connected to a healthy vine with an attentive and caring gardener. Withering is what branches do when they are not intimately and organically connected to the vine. Fruit-bearing and withering are natural consequences related to the vitality and intimacy of our relationship with Jesus.

“As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you, “Jesus says, “Now remain in my love.”

The Father’s love never wavers. If that has not made it into your head yet, take a moment, emblazon it there. God’s love never wavers. If it has not made it into your heart yet, dwell awhile with that truth. God’s love never wavers. Remaining in God’s love does not mean remaining worthy of God’s love or knowledgeable enough for God’s love or capable enough for God’s love or good enough for God’s love. God’s love never wavers. God will not stop loving you. God will not stop loving me.

What does it mean, then, to remain in God’s love? This word ‘remain’ in the NIV means abide, dwell in, make a home in, be united with, be immersed in, be intimately connected to. Abide in my love. Dwell in my love. Make a home in my love.

God’s love never wavers. But, because God loves us, he will not cage us in his love. We are free to roam. We are free to abide elsewhere. We are free to dwell in the love of money or the love of cars or the love of knowledge or the love of reputation or the love of self. We can abide in something other than love. We can abide in fear or anger or self-condemnation or unforgiveness.

Sometimes, even if we want to, it is not easy to leave behind one of these other homes and make a home in God's love. Sometimes we grow quite accustomed to these other homes and it can be hard to pull up stakes and totally leave them behind. We leave for awhile, and then we come wandering back.

Sometimes we treat God's love like a take-out order. We pick some up on Sunday morning at church or Tuesday evening at a small group meeting or listening to Christian music on the way to work Thursday morning, but we still spend most of our time where our furniture is...and our furniture is someplace other than God's love.

Making a home in God's love is not without its challenges. Worries and competing desires and aching wounds and troublesome questions constantly pull at us and threaten to tear at our intimate connection to our Lord.

An actual branch on an actual grape vine might be torn from the vine by high winds or a heavy storm, by a passing animal or a falling tree. There is not much that the branch can do about it. We branches are not plants but human beings, and we have the ability and the freedom to make choices of our own, so we can actively cling to the vine. In the midst of storms, we can burrow more deeply into our Lord. When the trials of this life threaten to trample us or tear us, there are actions we can take to strengthen our connection to the vine that gives us life.

It isn't always easy, though, and it takes practice.

The choice to make a home in God's love or to make a home elsewhere, Jesus says, is the choice to obey or to disobey. Certainly the Holy Spirit is the one who gives us grace to obey, but also the Holy Spirit honors a choice to disobey. The God whose love never wavers honors the choices of his loved ones. That is an expression of his love. Jesus says that making a home in God's love, or not, is a choice to obey or disobey.

Obedience is not a popular word in our culture. Not just obedience to God, but to anybody or anything. Obedience, according to the conventional wisdom of our culture, strips a person of individuality and squelches a person's creativity and denies a person's freedom. Well--surprise, surprise--the conventional wisdom of our culture is wrong.

Obedience to God, Jesus says, is the way that we make a home in God's love. This is the God of Abraham; the creator of the universe; the triune Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; the One whose love never wavers and whose plan for the redemption of all creation is sure and certain; the attentive and caring gardener. Obedience to God is the way that we make a home in God's love.

Obedience does not earn us a place in God's love. That is a gift which we have not earned and cannot earn. Obedience is the way that we move into God's love and make our home there. Obedience is the way that we sort through all our stuff and figure out what to get rid of and what to take with us. Obedience is how our furniture gets moved from wherever we have been prone to dwell to the embrace of God's love. Obedience is what strengthens our resilience in the midst of storms and in the wake of challenges. Obedience is the way that we move into God's love and make a home there.

Obedience covers quite a lot of ground. Here in this passage, however, Jesus boils it down to the main thing of the main thing. Jesus says that obedience, at its core, is about self-sacrificing mutual love. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. ... My command is this: Love one another as I have loved you."

Obedience is about self-sacrificing mutual love. Obedience is the way we make a home in God's unwavering love. Obedience places us in our assigned place in God's sure and certain plan for the redemption of all creation. Obedience places us where we will bear fruit.

Jesus also says that this obedience that he's talking about is all wrapped up in joy. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and so that your joy may be complete." Have you ever known anybody who was all focused on obedience, but they tended to be really cranky about it? When obedience is cranky, it's a pretty good sign that it's time to burrow deeper into the embrace of God's love. When obedience is marked by resentment or bitterness, it's a pretty good sign that it's time to burrow deeper into the embrace of God's love. When obedience is wrapped up in condemnation--either condemnation of self for failing to meet one's own expectations or condemnation of others for not keeping up--it's a pretty good sign that it's time to burrow deeper into the embrace of God's love. The obedience that Jesus is talking about here is all wrapped up in joy.

Fruit comes to bloom on a branch, but it is the product of the vine. Branches do not make fruit, the vine makes fruit. Connected to the vine, a branch bears fruit. Apart from the vine, a branch bears nothing.

Fruit does not hang upon the branches of the vine like ornaments on a Christmas tree. If that were the case it would not matter if the branches were alive or dead, real or artificial, organically growing from the vine or clipped on with elastic twist-ties. But it does matter.

Fruit grows on a branch from the inside out, directed and nourished, given texture and flavor and color and value from the vine to which the branch is connected. It matters if the branch is alive or dead. It matters if the branch is real or artificial. It matters if the branch is growing organically from the vine or clipped on with twist-ties.

Obedience to the triune God does not strip us of individuality, but rather sets us free to become who we were designed to be...uniquely and joyfully. Obedience to the triune God does not squelch our creativity, but sets us free to be co-creators with the Creator of the universe. Obedience to the triune God does not deny our freedom. It is, in fact, the only way to be set free. Obedience to the triune God yields for us a dwelling place in the embrace of God's unwavering love. Dwelling in the embrace of God's unwavering love, we are set free to lay down our lives for others. Dwelling in the embrace of God's unwavering love, we are aligned with our place in God's sure and certain plan for the redemption of all creation, so that we might do that for which we were chosen. Dwelling in the embrace of God's unwavering love, we are filled with joy.

Thanks be to God.