

Centre Street Congregational Church, UCC

Machias, Maine

May 2, 2021

*"We're Not Alone in This"*

Rev. Susie Maxwell

*Let us pray . . .*

There are many apple trees on Max's and my land. We have two in particular that I am drawn to. One is to the right of the driveway when you pull in and the other is down by the south end of the barn. They are rather wild and untamed. Across the years we've tidied them up, but

lately I've been wanting to be more intentional about shaping them, but they are so overgrown, I feel completely overwhelmed. So much cutting, trimming, pruning, clearing, hauling and on and on and on. In other words, there is so much work to be done.

I find the same feelings confront me when I think about the needs here in our local community. There is so much need and work to be done right here in our midst.

Between caring for yourselves and your families, caring for each other here in our faith community and tending to our wider needs, our immediate world can often feel like an untamed backyard. We have visions of how we hope things can and will be and we have some tools to help us shape those visions, but the work sure can feel overwhelming. But, the reason we do any of this work at all is because as people of faith, we believe that we are all one and in our oneness, we need to help care for and carry each other.

You may know that the motto of the United Church of Christ, from John 17:21 is "That they may all be one." As you heard earlier, the theme of oneness is at the heart of our Just Action Committee's mission across this month.

So it's helpful that this morning's lesson is John's Jesus with one of his curious "I Am" stories. While in Mark, Matthew and Luke Jesus teaches about God through the parables, in John he teaches about God through the "I Am" statements, which relay the divinity of Jesus through his intimacy with God. And whereas the Apostle Paul brought us the notion of Christ as the whole body as the oneness into which believers are incorporated, in John, Christ is the whole vine representing this same oneness for believers.

This "I Am" statement addressed to his disciples, is part of Jesus' farewell speech. He knows he's going to die and so he is preparing his disciples for his departure. Through the invitation to abide in him, he is assuring them that they will not be left alone.

Through the imagery of a vine and vine grower, Jesus shows how this is possible by first describing his relationship to God. As you heard Becky read, he begins by saying.

*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.*

Jesus then shows how his relationship is with the his disciples.

*You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.*

By saying, “Abide in me,” John’s Jesus offers a way for his disciples to understand the intimacy between the Father, Jesus and themselves. The vineyard imagery — which was been something they would have been quite familiar with in their geographical location — helps them to make sense of what it means to abide in Jesus. We might use the imagery of an apple tree here in downeast Maine, with Jesus being the true apple tree, and God as the apple tree grower. That’s part of God’s beauty, there’s always some imagery or language that can be used to help us understand.

*Abide in me.*

Abide comes from the Greek root word *meno* meaning to stay or remain.

Jeri read Barbara's piece highlighting the history of discrimination and hate crimes against Asians and Pacific Islanders. Our culture seems to have many things abiding in it:

Violence

Fear

Ignorance

Hatred

These are the things that are born out of no true place to abide. When Jesus used the word true, he meant an underlying reality of authenticity.

When people have no true center, no place where they can be received or loved with the truth, hear what is real, and know life-giving ways they might live from or otherwise experience the Divine, then they're going

to take it out on other people because they are always seeking to feed a false voice that says we are in competition with each other.

Without the intimacy of belonging in community and shaped and tended to by God, or something bigger than ourselves — there are many world religions and ways of being in the world expressing relationship to a greater guiding goodness — then without that relationship, there is no life-giving ground to stand on.

The beauty of this morning's lesson is that there is a unitive and enveloping feel to it — in fact, Biblical scholar Caroline Lewis writes that the whole imagery is John's way of underscoring this Gospel's primary theological claim of abiding and union.

So in this image of being able to produce fruit, in other words produce life-giving meaning, Jesus teaches that this can only happen when we abide or stay, remain with what he taught us about God — starting with loving God, which is perhaps another way of abiding or staying with the

things that have to do with loving one another, showing justice and mercy, compassion and other things of God's making.

When we continually hear of acts of hatred and violence against others, I understand that it can be hard to know where God is. We want God to intervene and save the day. This seemingly lack of caring and acting on God's side drives the point of this morning's lesson .

The text is a comforting reminder that if we abide, stay or remain with God, then we will find that God is right there with us. What the text doesn't tell us is *how* God will be with us — I've learned that that is up to God based on well, frankly, mystery. Exactly how the one who made us knows us and knows what we need and what is needed, somehow gets accomplished through this miraculous union of abiding.

I think it can be too easy to think that God is some external and distant deity we sing and pray to, something we might meet at the end of it all, while hoping for an encounter or some mercy when we screw up.

And for sure, God does feel external and distant at times, as if we're viewing the vineyard or the apple tree from far away. But know this, God is also as active and present as the very buds and blossoms underway, meaning God is very active and present because God *is* union, abiding, staying, remaining, oneness and relationship.

And there is nothing that will stop God from communicating and working with us, working within us through the power of abiding with God.

This power is waiting for us to join the union. This power shows up as a willingness to get involved. It shows up in brainstorming ideas and what actions to take. It shows up in bravery in sharing our stories and it shows up in perseverance and hope.

That doesn't mean our path forward won't be painful or frightening at times, but what choosing to abide with God does mean is that we don't have to go it alone.

So as we welcome the start of a new month, if you don't think you are abiding with the Holy, I encourage you to accept the invitation to do so. In other words, make a conscious effort to stay with what is Holy and sacred. Remain with what is merciful, loving, compassionate and hopeful.

It's how we'll get out of difficult places and build community. There is much work to be done, but in abiding union, we can help shape a better vision for all of God's people and this month, we begin by supporting our Asian and Pacific Islander sisters and brothers — under the loving guidance of God.