**WEST CENTER CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH, UCC May 3, 2015**

***Abide in Me* A Sermon for the Fifth Sunday of Easter by the Rev. John M. Barrett**

**THE EPISTLE OF THE DAY** 1 John 4:7-21

**THE GOSPEL WITNESS** John 15:1-8 The Gospel Witness for today is from the poetic Gospel of John. Last week Jesus referred to himself as the Good Shepherd. Today Jesus is using another metaphor, calling himself the True Vine, his Father, the Vine Grower, and his followers, the Branches.

**SERMON** If you have never grown grapes nor visited a vineyard,, you might assume that grapes grow on vines, as in grapevines. But actually grape growing is a bit more complicated than that, and Jesus, the True Vine, sets the story straight.

Grapes need a vine grower (in this case, God), who plants a vine (Jesus), and from the vine of Jesus grow the branches (disciples), and from the branches grow the fruit, the grapes, (the faithful life).

The last verse of the Gospel for today says, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciple." (John 15:8) And what kinds of fruit grow on the branches of the disciples? John does not name the fruits in his Gospel, but if we look at St. Paul's Letter to the Galatians, in the fifth chapter we read: "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. ... (and) If we live by the Spirit, let us also be guided by the Spirit. Let us not become conceited, competing against one another, envying one another." (Galatians 5:22-23, 5:25-26)

St. Paul goes on to say in the following chapter of Galatians: "My friends, if anyone is detected in a transgression, you who have received the Spirit should restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness. Take care that you yourselves are not tempted. Bear one another's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ." (Galatians 6:1-2)

Jim Manley, a United Church of Christ minister, was inspired by St. Paul's phrase, "spirit of gentleness.” Jim expanded on its meaning, and set his words to music. His song, “Spirit of Gentleness,” has become a United Church of Christ anthem. We will be singing it as the Hymn of Response to the sermon this morning.

By reading the New Testament, we learn that the fruits of our faith are love, joy and peace, and that we are to treat others, as we ourselves would like to be treated --- with a spirit of gentleness, bearing one another's burdens.

But even when we know what fruits we are to grow and how Jesus asks us to treat others, how is it that we are able to grow these fruits of faith? How are we enabled to bear one another’s burdens?

Well, as you might suspect, an answer is right here, in the Gospel reading for today. Jesus gives the answer over and over again. Listen and try to count the number of times Jesus says "Abide."

*"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."*

"Abide in me." What does “Abide in me” mean?

“Abide” is a rather old fashioned, out-of-fashion word. We may never say “abide,” and we seldom read or hear it used, except in the old hymn, “Abide with Me,” which we sing during Holy Week on the evening Maundy Thursday service in remembrance of the Last Supper.

And so, in order to more clearly understand the meaning of Jesus’ saying, “Abide in me,” I read several other English translations of today’s Gospel, which helped me to understand his meaning more clearly.

For “Abide in me” the New English Bible reads, “Dwell in me.” The JB Phillips New Testament is “Grow in me.” The Jerusalem Bible translates “Abide in me,” as “Make your home in me.” Today’s English Translation is “Remain in me,” which The New International Version of the Bible also uses. And finally The Living Bible translates “Abide in me,” as “Stay in me” and “Live in me.”

So when Jesus says, “Abide in me,” Jesus means, “Dwell in me.” “Grow in me.” “Make your home in me.” “Remain in me.” “Stay in me.” “Live in me.” “Abiding in Jesus” is living in him, growing in him, making our home in him, and staying in him.

The hymn “The Church’s One Foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord,” speaks of “mystic sweet communion” with others through Jesus, and I think that mystical unity or “mystic sweet communion” with Jesus and each other is at least part of what abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit are about.

And how do we attain this mystical unity with our Lord? A fundamental step, which I don’t have to preach about to you who are here today, is coming to worship regularly, coming to worship regularly to praise God, to pray, to sing, to ponder the Scriptures, to share the bread and juice of Holy Communion in the Sanctuary and the coffee and cake of our communion of fellowship at Coffee Hour, and then to go out into the world, renewed and rejoicing on our way.

But abiding in Jesus is more than coming to church on Sunday morning. Abiding in Jesus is knowing and pondering Jesus’ teachings about the universal love of God, of the power of forgiving and being forgiven, and Jesus’ commandment, “Love one another as I have loved you.” Abiding in Jesus is knowing and pondering Jesus’ teachings and his love, not only on Sunday morning in church but also “in the wee small hours of the morning, while the whole wide world is fast asleep” and we can’t quite join them because something is troubling us.

Instead of counting sheep or even counting our blessings, we can pray, turning our troubles over to Jesus for the night, adding that we’ll be back for them in the morning, and that we will surely welcome any suggestions that he might have for us. After all, in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says, “Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.” So Jesus is bound to have other sound ideas for us if we pray and listen.

Malcolm Boyd, a Episcopal clergyman and a leader in the civil rights and social justice movements in the 60’s and 70’s, understood prayer as an ongoing conversation with Jesus, in the midst of activities, as well as in times of quiet contemplation. His most famous book, Are You Running with Me, Jesus?, is a collection of prayers that shows his questions, his struggles and his hope. Here are two of Malcolm Boyd’s prayers, one asks and the other thanks:

*I’m nowhere, Lord, and I couldn’t care less.*

It’s so still. Am I on the moon? Am I on the earth? Am I *here* at all? But if so, where? I feel disengaged from life at this moment, Lord. Time has stopped, and nothing matters. I have nowhere to hurry, no place to go, no sensible goal. I might as well be dead. I want to feel a breeze blow against my face, or the hot sun warming me. I want to fee life Jesus, Help me to feel love or anger or laughter. Help me to care about life again.

*I'm having a ball, and I just want to thank you, Jesus.*This is a good day for me. Yesterday I was down, but today I'm up again. These people  I'm with are the greatest. The sun has really come out for me. I see everything in bright

reds and yellows. I hated the dark reds and the crying blues yesterday. I was mean, Lord,  and vicious, and I can hardly understand how anybody put up with me. But they didn't beatme down. They let me know what it is to be human because *they* stayed human. Now I'm  human again. I feel good, and I want to get out with the people and swing with them,  Jesus.  There’s somebody I was mean to yesterday.I want to knock myself out being nice to him today. Honestly, Lord, thank you.

Malcolm Boyd died in February at the age of 91. Reading his obituary in the Times prompted me to think about him again and pull his books down from my library shelves.

In addition to going to church and praying, we also live and grow in Jesus by our actions: when we are generous of spirit, when we take the initiative in a situation, when we walk toward someone who is in need, rather than away from them, when we experience the joy of giving from our abundance.

It may seem a paradox, but we grow the fruits of the spirit by demonstrating the fruits of the spirit. The fruits of the spirit: love, joy and peace, are like cherries, raspberries and strawberries, and also like dahlias, pansies and zinnias, the more you pick them, the more they bloom. The more lovingly, joyfully and peacefully we live the more we bloom with even more love, joy and peace.

In the spring I always think of A. E. Housman’s poem, “A Shropshire Lad.”

*Loveliest of trees, the cherry now*

*Is hung with bloom along the bough,*

*And stands about the woodland ride*

*Wearing white for Eastertide.*

*Now, of my threescore years and ten,*

*Twenty will not come again,*

*And take from seventy springs a score,*

*It only leaves me fifty more.*

*And since to look at things in bloom*

*Fifty springs are little room,*

*About the woodlands I will go*

*To see the cherry hung with snow.*

May the beauty of this Eastertide in all its flowering wonderment, encourage us also to flower, bearing the fruits of the Spirit, as we abide in the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

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