

04.28.24 Worship Service

Welcome –

Call to Worship – I made a typing error as I created this reading from Psalm 22... The correct version is below:

Leader: From you comes my praise in the great congregation; my vows I will pay before those who fear him.

North: The poor shall eat and be satisfied; those who seek him shall praise the Lord.

All: *May your hearts live forever!*

Leader: All the ends of the earth shall remember and turn to the Lord;

South: and all the families of the nations shall worship before him.

All: *For dominion belongs to the Lord, and he rules over the nations.*

Leader: To him, indeed, shall all who sleep in the earth bow down; before him shall bow all who go down to the dust,

All: *And we shall live for him!*

Let's pray – Steadfast God, you have been our home from generation to generation. You are our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer and you are the One to whom all praise is given. You are also present here, in this place with us, your people. Move with your Spirit in our hearts and minds that we may walk in your ways and live your love. Amen.

Morning Prayer –

Creator God, we praise you and thank you for the gift of this new day. We're grateful to be gathered here this morning as your people, to worship you, to fellowship and learn together, to sing your praises. We ask you to bless our time of worship, may we be open to the truths that we find in your word, and the hope that we find through your Spirit.

Merciful God, we bring you our prayers as we think of those we love who are struggling with illness. We ask for healing and for peace. Be with Gary and Darla and their friends and family as they spend time together, enjoying the gift of one another. Be with others whose focus is on their health or the health of their loved one, whether the illness be physical, mental, emotional or spiritual, we ask for health and healing. Be with those who may be in the midst of making health care decisions. Grant them wisdom and clarity.

Comforting God, we pray for those who grieve – especially for Ann Flaming and her family as they remember and miss Les. We thank you for his life, for his gentle nature and sense of humor. Be with his family as they adjust to life without him. We pray for others who are grieving; we know grief is a process, God, and we ask for your continued presence as we walk through it.

Thank you for recent rains. Be with those who've experienced damage and losses due to the storms. O Lord, you know the extent of damage and losses not just here, but all over this area, our country, and the world – from storms, from wars, from violence done between people, as a result of people's greed and hunger for power. Often we can't see a way forward or how things can ever possibly resolve. We trust that your Love and Peace will prevail and that

your people the world over will be steadfast, courageous and hopeful in leading with compassion.

We pray in the hope of your son Jesus – who is the light of the world. Amen.

Message --

John 15:1-8; I John 4:7-19 – Every Branch is Pruned (with Love)

Pastor Lois Harder

In 2024, not only is it bad manners, it's actually illegal to open someone else's mail. But in the case of I John, it was considered an honor in those days to have your letter read by lots of people (not just those it was meant for). I John is referred to as a letter, but it's actually more an essay or a brief "memo" one might say. It was written to a group of first-century Jesus-followers to try to help them deal with a specific problem. The problem was that there was a conflict; it was a pretty significant conflict. Some of their members denied that Jesus had been an actual human. There were detractors who were making this claim and some in that early church were going along with it, saying that Jesus had simply been present as a spirit, but not as an actual flesh and blood person. Those people had left the church and the ones who remained were having a hard time not getting caught up in this argument and they were forgetting what Jesus had taught them about shaking the dust from their feet and staying focused on their discipleship journeys.

The writers' message was clear... Here's my paraphrase – "Remember who you are! Remember who you follow and what he taught! He taught you to love each other – with a fierce, abiding love. Because THAT'S what sets you apart. THAT'S what makes you different from all the other splinter religious groups. And that's what the watching world needs to see. They need to witness that kind of love that Jesus taught being lived out in community that follows him. That doesn't mean that you'll always agree with one another! But WHEN you disagree do it carefully, thoughtfully, in ways that maintain and uphold the honesty and integrity of the relationships that Jesus worked so hard to nurture in you. Love each other with the kind of love that models and reflects God. Because God. Is. Love. Remember? That's what Jesus came to teach, to show, to live. Since nobody has ever seen God, it's our job to show the world what this Love looks like."

Scholars aren't sure who wrote these epistles that have John's name on them; he only refers to himself as "the elder". But the writer of 1 John is very similar in style and message to the writer of the gospel of John, so these passages pair together very well in this Easter season. The lectionary writers continue to focus on the life, death and resurrection of Jesus and what that all means for his followers – then and now.

We go back this morning, in the gospel of John to Jesus' last conversations with his disciples before his death – it's a reminder of his final instructions which was what the writer of I John was also trying to communicate to his readers.

Just a couple chapters before this morning's reading, in John 13 we read about Jesus washing his disciples' feet – a radical display of servant leadership... and love. In John 14 Jesus was explaining how God lovingly prepares a place for each of us to be with him – with the added assurance that Jesus himself will make sure that we get to that place. And now, in John 15 Jesus uses this image of the vine, the vinegrower and the branches to describe what it means to abide in him and him in us.

Once again, Jesus is transforming old understandings of things and making them new. There are lots of references in the Hebrew Bible to the faithful Hebrew people being the vine and God being the vinegrower. But here Jesus is making it clear that the Hebrew people had broken the covenant with God so completely that now HE himself is the vine, God is still the vinegrower, but Jesus brings a new character into the scenario – the branches. That's us.

Here's a bit of interesting and helpful word study from this passage. The Greek root for the word "abide" can mean several things: "to stay in place", "to endure", "to hold out". The Greek word for "prune" in verse 2 is from the same root as the word "cleansed" in verse 3. This root is the same one (katharos) used in chapter 13 about footwashing when Jesus said, "You are all clean (or cleansed), though not all of you". So the writer here has brilliantly connected the idea of being cleansed with being pruned. So the image is of God, the Loving vinegrower cleaning us, pruning us while we're trying to "abide", to stay in place, to cling tightly to the vine.

Do those seem like contradictory efforts to you? I mean, how are the branches supposed to "stay in place" and cling to the vine while the vinegrower is pruning them? Here's another way of thinking about it – maybe some of you young parents can relate to this... when I'm tasked with bathing my 21-mo.-old grandson Neil, it's a challenge because "abiding" in the bath (staying in place, enduring, holding out – in the bath) is not his strong suit. But I need him to do that so that I can clean him. So when I tell him that it's time to stop playing in the bathtub because now we're going to wash up and get clean, I need gather up my most loving, firm, determined, purposeful, loving attitude and I scrub. And usually it's really hard for Neil to "abide" being in the bath at that point. He does not want to stay in place, to endure or to hold out. He wants to GET out!

I wonder if maybe we're all a little bit like Neil. When we're being pruned or cleansed – even by the Loving hands of God – I think it's pretty hard for us to "abide", to cling tightly to that vine and "stay in place". And furthermore, I'm not sure most of us really perceive a strong need for that pruning. Our little Neil is pretty sure that he can grow and thrive and be perfectly happy as a sticky, dirty little toddler who does not need to be cleansed. I think we all have our doubts about whether we need it; it's inconvenient, it's humbling – and sometimes humiliating, it's time consuming and we're not in control of it.

This process of being pruned – it means letting go of what's not serving well, trusting the vinegrower to snip off those carefully tended grudges, saying goodbye to those lovely, long tendrils of anger or jealousy, or finally realizing that the thick tangle of the bindweed of unacknowledged hurt or mistakes has bound us too tightly, for too long. And as the vinegrower

lovingly but firmly prunes and cleanses and snips and cuts, it can hurt, it can leave a gaping, vulnerable space. This is why the branches need each other so much. While the pruning is being done (which, we hope, is our whole lives long...) we can provide stability and strength to each other. You could say that we can offer each other abide-ability – while we're all being pruned, clinging to the vine that is the source of who we are and what we need.

This is the kind of love that the watching world longs to see in us – that makes us different. It's the kind of love that encourages and supports, that's genuinely curious and wants to understand, that will make time to listen, to learn to really see each other. The world needs people who are committed to abiding in Jesus, and who demonstrate Jesus abiding in us. The world needs people who have entrusted themselves to God's transformative, nurturing care, who are allowing themselves to be pruned and cleansed and therefore, produce sweet fruit. The world needs to see some different actions and hear a different message than what they see and hear all around them, all the time – in the news, in our communities and our politics. This radically alternative love and strength was what Jesus came to teach us how to do and be. And the only chance we have of showing it is if we abide in Jesus, the vine and welcome the loving pruning of the vinegrower. By the gentle power of the Holy Spirit, may we be the kind of people that this world needs.

Prayer of Dedication –

Thank you, God, for these gifts of money and for those who've given them. Thank you for ALL the gifts that are offered in your name and for the building of your kingdom. Bless each and every one, that your love may be shared through the giving of our gifts. Amen.

Benediction –

The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. Amen.