

Karen Hollis | May 2, 2021

1 John 4:7-21 | Psalm 22:25-31 | John 15:1-8

Abide and Bear Fruit

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us today, in Jesus' name we pray. Amen

It's hard to contain the spring energy in the air. The spring growth on the trees and plants echo our own sense of expanding with the warm weather and stretches of sunshine. It really was a long winter where so many aspects of life lay fallow. We didn't go places or see many people; we didn't buy many things . . . most everything could be put off. Now, not only are we emerging into the sunshine, life itself seems to be quickening. There are errands to run, maintenance to attend to, gardens to prepare, shots to get. And everywhere we go, we see people we haven't seen all winter. Various parts of ourselves are emerging after a long winter with new spring growth. This year may be out of the ordinary and a bit extreme, but this is a natural human phenomenon to go through fallow seasons, seasons of growth and seasons of pruning.

I was reflecting this week on the season of pruning in my own life that brought me to Gabriola. In 2014 I was doing children & family ministry in Seattle at a high-profile downtown church. I felt strongly about pursuing a ministry that included young people, but the denomination wasn't going to ordain me into Children & Family Ministry, itself. We felt done with Seattle and called to move north, where I knew ministry opportunities were even more limited. Looking even farther north into BC, Campus Ministry was still ministry with young people, and a good fit for me, so we made the move. During those years in Vancouver I was well connected with the Children & Family Ministry people in BC and even presented at a conference. I wasn't invited to present the following year . . . simply because they like to have a variety of leaders; it wasn't personal, but it seemed like a message. Then I missed a meeting on getting Children & Youth included in the ends policy of BC Conference because I wrote the wrong time into my calendar. I applied for a couple of positions in the area of children to young adults . . . and nothing. The doors weren't opening there, and it was perplexing, because I believe so strongly in that work . . . but that just isn't where God is calling me. That branch felt dead; I chose not to fight it as it was pruned away.

It was so clear that I was called to Gabriola, and while at first it was a shock to the system to be preaching every week and presiding regularly at the table, to have this weekly rhythm of worship planning, etc., this is where I'm called to be, and this is where I've grown into my calling . . . as I currently understand it.

My story is not unique; all of us have seasons that begin as disappointment or deep grief and turn into the next chapter of abundant life . . . as doors close and others open, as one branch gets pruned and another trellised, as God brings us more in line with the call on our lives.

God has certainly been known to break into people's lives out of nowhere, but this morning's scripture is about intentionality; it's about making clear choices to live in relationship with God, which gives us ears more attuned to God's invitations. Jesus uses the word **abide** to describe it. Over and over again the word appears in the gospel text . . . John uses it in his letter, too. Abide in me, Jesus says, as I abide in you . . . *abide – it's a word with depth and nuance . . . it's an invitation to tarry, to cling, to depend, to persevere, to commit, to continue, to endure, to accept. To hang in there for the long haul. To make ourselves at home<sup>1</sup> in Christ. Theologian Debie Thomas unpacks it this way: to abide is "passive on the one hand, and active on the other. To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It's a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we'll get pruned. It's a risky verb: if we abide, we'll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It's a humbling verb: if we abide, we'll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making. And it's a relentlessly communal verb — if we abide, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches. We will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled, and gorgeous. A life that's deeply rooted and wildly fertile."*<sup>2</sup>

Many Christian theologians assert that you can't be a follower of Jesus on your own . . . that this is indeed a communal path with a whole mess of branches, all connected to the same vine. As a community we've just come through a kind of pruning process, where after deep listening and multiple revisions, we

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<sup>1</sup> Debie Thomas, [journeywithjesus.net](http://journeywithjesus.net), April 22, 2018

<sup>2</sup> Ibid

set in our midst a covenant; it's a very gentle pruning process to take all the possibilities and focus our energy on these certain things, saying "this is what we're about . . . this is where we will put our energy" . . . we have discerned that these are places God will meet us and help us bear fruit. The covenant serves as a kind of trellis for our gorgeous mess of branches. It will help us stay focused on our call as a community, as we currently understand it; it will help us explore and practice what it means to abide in Christ. Here in community, there is room to challenge ourselves, a web of support and encouragement; there is grace, there is compassion, and the unending love of God that will not let us go. I'm so excited for us to discover together the fruit we will bear.