

# PILGRIM

## CHURCH

An open and affirming congregation of the United Church of Christ

### ABIDING PRESENCE --- BEARING FRUIT

John 15: 1 – 8    May 10, 2009

Pilgrim Bud Precise

God's presence in our lives is evident in the ways we choose to live.

We had just met. I had been introduced as a minister. He launched into this speech about how he didn't much care for organized religion, but he wanted to me to understand that he believed in God. And, he thought what was important about religion was that we were all trying to get to the same place in the afterlife. I will willingly let that be until he finished with, "Don't you think that is the whole point of religion, Reverend?" Maybe I should have just been polite as we Southerners are taught to be. And it seemed that he had not done much thinking on the purpose of religion. But I answered, "No, as a matter of fact, I don't believe that. I don't think the point of religion is the afterlife – at least not the Christian religion." I don't believe we can have some vague notion of the man upstairs and that everything is going to be all right. I believe that religion has to do with living an ordered life. Besides that, God is not just a concept of someone "up yonder." God is present among us – in the spirit of Jesus and in the people around us. Religion has to do with our present existence, the way we choose to live our lives.

I believe that. There is an order to our living. In our text today, John writes about vines and branches. In Jesus, we understand "the word became flesh and dwelt among us." In Jesus, we understand the character and nature of God. And like Jesus, we are made in that image of God. We live our lives like branches connected to the vine. This analogy is like Jesus saying, "God can make you green living things."

The text does begin with the sentence about branches that bear no fruit being removed. And the branch that bears fruit is pruned to make I bear more fruit.

Anyone who grows roses knows the importance of pruning. Or for that matter fruit trees – apple or peaches – or even crape myrtle bushes. The fruit, the rose, the flower will come from the new growth after pruning. We are not comfortable with the idea of pruning. It is like getting rid of part of us. (Is that why we have so many mini-storage places?) But life becomes rushed, busted. Our relation to God gets overlooked, even lost. We don't have time for devotion, meditation, prayer, study, discernment. We just don't have time for our ordered life. Paul would probably say we get caught up in the ways of the world.

I have never thought the church should "prune" members because they are not faithful members. What is faithful for one person is not nearly faithful enough for another person. We are not all alike. The Church of The Savior in Washington DC has very rigid requirements for church membership. Founded in the 1940's, the church sought to have desire and accountability as a center piece of membership. Anyone was welcome to come to services, but becoming a member was a two or three year process that included study, service and financial commitment. It is a very different process from most churches. I think the intent of membership at Church of The Savior was for members to see this order of branches dependent upon the vine – and discipleship was a concrete demonstration of that relationship.

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We all understand that a church cannot bear fruit by itself. It is in this relation to God that the church understands mission and purpose. That was the focus of our Lent study on Intimacy and Community. Who are we? What is our relationship to God and to each other?

In verse 3 of our text today, the Greek word is *kathoros* (cleansed) which seems to stress the unproductive, unattached disciples will be pruned from the vine. I am not very interested in putting people out of the church. I am hopeful that the character of our following Jesus will cause all our members to consider what it means to order our lives after Christ.

But today, I don't think the stress should be on pruning, though we all know what it is to lose our way of trust in God because we do not attend to the importance of matching our deeds with our words. We know what it is to get caught up in endeavors that consume our passion for living out the gospel. Today, I want the stress of the text to fall on the relation between the vine and the branches. What does it mean for disciples to "be fruitful branches?" The text doesn't really answer that question. But it does say that disciples are to abide in the Lord. **I believe abiding in the lord means we must love as God loves us. A measure of our discipleship is evident in the way we use our time, our resources, and our influence.** A community of faith that doesn't have "Love one another as God loves you" cannot even exist long, much less bear fruit of that relationship of vine to branches. Not only is this relationship evident within the community of faith, it is present in the way we relate to the world in which we live.

She came to the church looking for some food for her grandchildren and she needed some money to go buy the brand they liked. We did have some food, and of course, it was the wrong brand. I explained it was the policy of the church to not give money. Then she wanted to know if I could give her some money for gas. It thought it odd, so I said, "Let's go look at your car." When I turned on the ignition, the gas gauge read "full." I pointed that out to her and left. Frustrating? Yes, of course. But that didn't mean the next person who came by would be trying to get some cash for whatever.

One thing I do believe about this "abide in me" statement is the assurance that God's love will always abide with us. God will never give up on us. The biblical story ends in Revelation with the words, "I will be their God and they will be my children"(Rev.21:7) Even if we are faithless, it is the character of God to remain faithful. Often at a funeral service I read from the Gospel of John "I will come again and will take you to myself, so that where I am, you may be also." I believe that is an appropriate passage because it speaks of God's abiding, of dwelling with us – now and always. It is the promise of eternal life – now and always. Nothing, no body, no force, not even death will be able to separate us from this abiding presence of God with us.