

## “Burnout”

John 15:1-8

*Fifth Sunday of Easter; May 2, 2021*

All too often we hear of people burning out due to stressful situations, personal problems, and other difficulties in life. This past week I heard of yet another clergy person for whom this is the case. The stress because of COVID, increasing individualism, the rise of uncivil discourse in our society, and loss of confidence in the gospel affect churches severely. Those responsible for sowing, nurturing, and cultivating God's people as a field for harvest are facing increasing demands to stay alive and not die on the vine. It's essential that we, clergy especially, realize that we're branches and that we must remain in the vine.

As Jesus prepares his disciples for what is to come, he even warns them about the possibility of a form of burnout: “If people don't remain in me, they are thrown out, like a branch, and they wither. People collect the branches and put them on the fire, and they are burned.” It would be easy for the disciples to think they have to go it alone, given all of Jesus's talk about him going away, and as a result to end up experiencing burnout. But notice that Jesus speaks here of their needing to abide in him continually, *even after he's physically gone*. He will still be with them, and they are to remain in him. Thus, they don't necessarily have to experience burnout. Those who don't remain in him will not bear fruit and will be useless in ministry. It's that simple. The reality is that harsh. As one Bible commentator states: “These are strong words that emphasize the necessity of remaining in vital contact with Christ if fruitfulness is to continue.” Another Bible commentator goes so far as to say: “Jesus left no place among his followers for fruitless disciples.”

Read through the gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, John) and the Book of Acts and you will see that Jesus's followers will be sorely tested in the days, weeks, months, and years ahead. Place Jesus's words from John chapter 15 in their immediate context and we read that Jesus will be taken from his disciples that very night and be led to his death. Nothing is said that Jesus will go on to a happy, middle-class life with a full pension to underwrite it. And while Jesus will rise from the dead on the third day, return to the right hand of the Father and always be with them through the Holy Spirit, there's no guarantee that they will remain in him — that is, apart from their constant dependence on him and his holding them in the palm of his hand. Jesus knows that they will face many trials that will test their resolve to remain in him. Jesus also knows that we, as fruit-bearing branches that abide in the vine, face trials that test our resolve to abide in him.

We face burnout nowadays for several reasons, among them having to deal with life during pandemic. There are so many distractions, so many potential traps that can easily capture our attention, so many concerns competing for our imaginations and so many loud voices tempting us to find our value in what we do rather than in knowing and being known by Jesus.

The temptations can be very subtle. We easily get caught up in what we're doing *for* Jesus rather than what we're doing *in* him and *being* in him. During this past year especially, it has been hard for me — mentally and emotionally — to step away from church responsibilities and be fully present to my wife and children. I have a better realization of how easy it is to view ourselves human *doings* rather than human *beings*. Don't get me wrong. Jesus wants us to bear fruit, and lots of it. But what kind of fruit does he want us to bear? I think answering this question can help us avoid burnout.

Jesus wants us to bear relational fruit. He's so passionate about knowing and being known by his Father and about his followers knowing and being known by God through him. Nothing else is comparable, and so the Father prunes us so that we find our nourishment for life in Jesus — and in him alone.

We live in a time when most people and organizations are trying to adapt amid strange, largely unknown circumstances. Our congregation, though more fortunate than others in comparison, is hurting. We have lost people and many familiar aspects of our life together. We will never be the same as we were before COVID. Sectarianism, institutional decline, free-market spirituality, and what-have-you can cut into a church's market share among religious consumers. But as painful as these changes are, these forces aren't cutting away branches from the fruit-bearing vine. The Father has a way of pruning us through difficult circumstances so that we reevaluate our priorities and come to see that what *really* counts is helping people find their relational security in God the Father through his Son Jesus. What this pruning will ultimately look like is anybody's guess. We can trust that God will do what's necessary so long as we remain in Christ.

As those working in the vineyard, we don't have to make branches abide in us. We need to adapt so that we can provide the ideal conditions for them to abide in Jesus. Nor is it our task to prune branches. Our task is to make clear to those for whom we're responsible that the gardening God is pruning them. And so that is what's happening. God is currently pruning our congregation. There are things that will feel as though they have been gathered up and burned and it will continue to hurt for a while. For whatever reasons there are times in the life of the church when it happens and we have to accept it and remain faithful. God has a way of pruning all of us so that we remain in Jesus who is the source of our life.

As hard as it is, the pruning is a gift — and it's necessary if we are to find ultimate relational security in Jesus. Branches can never replace the vine. We need to abide in Jesus. I want to trust Jesus in everything regarding this local church even after the outcome of next year's General Conference and the probable breaking up of the United Methodist Church over various matters including human sexuality. If God decides to gather up the denomination and take it away, I guess that's his business. I want us to remain in Christ.

The older I get, the more difficult life becomes. If there's such a thing as any grace coming out of COVID, it has caused me to more recognize my need for the vine. The weeds, the dry land, the polluted water (each one a metaphor for the current experience) so easily stunt my growth in the Spirit. But even worse than these external conditions is my internal condition of wanting to go it alone. I often try to bear fruit on my own, even though I know I desperately need to remain in the vine.

I'm not the only one trying to go it alone. Do you try to go it alone? Here's what Jesus said to his first followers: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you! The branch can't bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains in the vine. In the same way, you can't bear fruit unless you remain in me." Jesus would not have told Peter and company that they must remain in him if they were immune to the temptation of somehow trying to live in isolation from him.

Jesus knows us far better than we know ourselves. God has a way of clipping away at our autonomy, just like Peter's and the rest of Jesus's followers. The Gardener's way of making us depend on Jesus is to make us depend on him in prayer: "If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask for whatever you want and it will happen for you." If you and I want to grow and bear fruit, we need to depend on Jesus's word for our nourishment and move

from meditation on his word to petition in prayer. That's dependence. That's what it means to hang by a thread — meaning the vine. How about you? Are you hanging by the vine?

I'm not saying that every form of burnout in life is due to autonomy or going one's own way — as dangerous as that is. But I do believe such pseudo-independence, such disobedience, is a major reason why burnout occurs. If you're feeling burned-out, negative about work, church, or whatever, please consider that because you're not being fruitful and you're possibly dragging others down. Thank God for showing us how needy we are for him and how we can do nothing — *no thing* — apart from him. Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. People who remain in me, and I in them, are the ones who bear plenty of fruit. Without me, you see, you can't do anything." More and more, it should become clear to us that Jesus isn't saying that we can do a few spiritual, life-giving things apart from him. No, what Jesus is saying is that we can do *nothing* of vital spiritual significance — absolutely no strategic-planning for the future — apart from him.

The more dependent on the vine we become to bear fruit, the more mature we become. With God's pruning of the congregation comes opportunity to grow in ministry because there are ample opportunities to depend completely on Jesus. And why wouldn't we want to completely depend on him? Our congregation's maturity isn't necessarily based upon age. It's based upon our abiding in Jesus and Jesus in the life of each individual believer. Such abiding reflects Jesus's abiding in the Father and the Father in him. Such abiding is also connected to our living in the Father and the Son — and the Father and the Son living in us.

Jesus is pointing to union and communion with God in Jesus himself. The unity that Jesus speaks of isn't just a matter of "right standing" (although, biblically-speaking "right standing" with God is a facet of Christian unity). Nor is Jesus speaking of stoic "grin-and-bear-it" performance of duty (which has no biblical basis). The unity that Jesus refers to is our obeying all his commandments, not just the ones we consider to be tolerable. This obedience of Jesus's commandments flows from longing for intimacy with the Triune God. Such unity isn't initiated by our love for God. Unity is our response to God's love for us. God reveals his love to us through Jesus, God's Word made flesh, and God's Word of promise, creating faith in him, whereby he abides in us. We love God because God first loved us. So unity involves God's love, which Jesus reveals to us as he makes himself known to us and lives in us. In John 17:26, Jesus prays to the Father, "I have made your name known to them — yes, and I will make it known; so that the love with which you loved me may be in them, and I in them."

As in the case of Jesus's first followers, Jesus and his Father haven't left us to go it alone. Our God is here with us and in us, and we're to remain in Jesus and his word and in his Father through him. In the face of partisan-bickering that is oozing into congregations, institutional decline, free-market spirituality, and pandemic, we must refocus our attention and depend on Jesus's abiding presence. We must also depend on the Father to do the necessary work of pruning us so that we can grow relational fruit on the vine. How else will we receive the nourishment we need to grow such fruit? Let us pray with earnest that we will sense our need and ask that we will yearn to depend increasingly on Jesus and his word and his Father. And even if we sometimes don't sense our need and burnout as a result of doing our own thing, we can be assured that God can renew us and create a yearning for the nourishment of his abiding presence and grow fruit again through us. Stay in Jesus and the intimacy of his love, even if all else around us burns.

A closing story and then I'm done: the hymn "Abide with Me" was written during the summer of 1847 by Henry Lyte, an Anglican pastor. Inspired to write the hymn because of his

own battle with sickness and disease, Lyte finished the hymn the Sunday he gave his last sermon in the church he had served for many years in Devonshire, England. Lyte died of tuberculosis three weeks later.

The song has left its mark on multitudes of people for generations. “Abide with Me” was one of the hymns sung at the 1997 funeral for a reluctant recipient of the Nobel Peace Prize, Mother Teresa of Calcutta. Mother Teresa could not have bared all the work she did in the slums of Calcutta — surrounded by such hopelessness, poverty, sickness, and death — had she not abided in Jesus and God’s love. Although her frail body finally burned out and gave way to death, her heart never stopped burning with Jesus’s compassion for the least, the lost, and the last. How else could she have loved those whom others treated as unlovable? How can you? How can any of us? I, for one, don’t have that kind of love.

My prayer for myself is that on the day I die, by God’s grace, I will die as a saint. To be honest, this prayer scares me because it’s a request for pruning. I don’t know what that will look like. And yet Jesus tells me to love sacrificially just as he loves me. I don’t get to place my terms or my preferences on the pruning. If ever I’m to be pruned away from the church, let it be so. God knows what love is, and what love is for, far better than I — because God *is* love. It’s only as the Father prunes us — whether as his church and/or as individuals — causing us to depend all the more on Jesus, that we can hope to love as Jesus loves.

All too often we hear of people burning out due to stressful situations, personal problems, and other difficulties in life. Such will be our constant temptation for here on out. So hear what Jesus says, take it as a warning against burnout: “Remain in me, and I will remain in you! The branch can’t bear fruit by itself, but only if it remains in the vine. In the same way, you can’t bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. People who remain in me, and I in them, are the ones who bear plenty of fruit. Without me, you see, you can’t do anything.”

Let us not try to do anything without absolutely abiding in Jesus from here on out, okay? Whatever God wants to take away for burning, so it will be. Only by allowing God’s great thing to happen, come what may, can we remain in Christ and avoid burning out.

May the Holy Spirit consume us, lest we consume ourselves. Amen.

