

Fruit that will last

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[0 : 00] And so much joy this morning. Let's just take a moment and praise God and thank Him. Lord, thank you. Thank you for the joy of being together this morning. The joy of worshiping you, of being gathered together as your people. Lord, would you come? Would you rest on us? Would you pour your spirit out on us?

Not my words, but your words, Lord. Come Holy Spirit. Amen.

Mary Mitchell Slessor was a missionary to Nigeria. She was born in Scotland and grew up in a poor family with an alcoholic father. But despite her dark childhood, her mother had this really strong faith. And she became a Christian at a young age. She talked about how her mother's faith in the church was a ray of light for her, despite the pain of what she was going through.

By the time she was 14, her father and two brothers had died. And she worked 12-hour days to care for her family, to bring an income for her mother and two younger sisters.

Because of her work, she wasn't really able to be educated. She had some schooling here and there, but she managed to teach herself how to read.

[1 : 36] And the things she loved to read the most were her mother's monthly missionary magazines. This was like a thing in the mid-1800s in Scotland, in the Presbyterian Church. There was like missionary monthly.

And Mary loved these magazines. And so she decided she was like, I want to share the gospel. I want to talk about Jesus with people. So she started out by doing that in her neighborhood, by teaching Sunday school through the church.

But eventually, she felt this call to go to Nigeria as a missionary, as a single woman in the 1870s. And once she got there, the thing that was really remarkable about Mary Slessor is that she didn't live in a missionary compound.

That was pretty typical of the time, that the missionaries kind of lived apart from the people they were doing ministry among. But she decided to embed herself with the people and lived life with them day in and day out.

She adopted their culture, their dress, their food. She learned their language. And there had been many male missionaries killed in this area.

[2 : 40] The people that she was ministering to were known for being really violent. But she was able to go into this place and minister because she was a woman. And because she was so deeply abiding with these people, they recognized her as a friend and confidant.

She was able to start speaking boldly against tribal religious practices that involved human sacrifice and infanticide. Several tribes in this area practiced infanticide of twins because they believed that twins were offspring of demonic spirits.

So when twins were born, they would be abandoned and the mothers would be ostracized or killed. Over the course of her ministry, Mary adopted these children and saved hundreds of them from death.

Placing them in various mission compounds throughout Nigeria. But she adopted eight children and raised them herself as a single mother. And the people she lived with recognized her presence as so remarkable that she was eventually named vice consul of the court in Okoyang where she lived. And I think Mary's story takes this idea that we read about this morning in John 15 of abiding and bearing lasting fruit and flushes it out really beautifully. So as we look at this passage together, we're going to look at three main actions that Jesus talks about.

[4 : 05] We're going to talk about this concept of grafting, being grafted into the vine, abiding in the vine, and bearing fruit. First, we're going to talk about grafting.

And a big part of this grafting is the vine analogy. Verse 1, Jesus says, So why this analogy of the vine?

Well, because in the Old Testament, Israel is the vine planted by the Lord. There are several passages that talk about this. But almost all of them also refer to Israel as a vine that was rotten. That her fruit was wild. That the vine was out of control. Ezekiel 15 lines up really well with what we read this morning. Let me just read this quickly.

Therefore, this is what the sovereign Lord says. As I have given the wood of the vine among the trees of the forest as fuel for the fire, so will I treat my people living in Jerusalem.

[5 : 07] I will set my face against them. Although they have come out of the fire, the fire will yet consume them. And when I set my face against them, you will know that I am the Lord.

I will make the land desolate because they have been unfaithful. It's safe to say that Israel the vine was in bad shape. She was desolate and burned and exiled because of her rebellion and her apostasy and sin.

But this is the framework that Jesus is using when he starts talking about himself being the vine. I am the true vine, he says. There are two implications here. Jesus is the fulfillment of all the law and the prophets.

By saying he is the true vine, he's not only stopping Israel's downward slide and wildness, he's reversing it so that all creation can be restored.

And throughout the Gospels, we see him doing this. The places where sin and disease and death and decay are reigning, Jesus came and he corrected those things. Jesus triumphs where Israel failed.

[6 : 19] And secondly, when Jesus says, if anyone abides in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit, this is an offer that's available to all people, not just the Jews.

All people, all of us, now have the opportunity to be grafted into Jesus, to be attached to him as the vine, to be branches, to abide, and to bear good fruit.

So the second part of grafting is how. How do we get grafted onto the vine? How do we become branches? And the answer is all throughout John's Gospel.

We respond to Jesus' words. We believe in him. We receive him. And he gives us the right to become children of God. And this is what he means when he tells the disciples in verse 3, already you are clean because of the word I've spoken to you.

The disciples have been grafted in because they've responded to Jesus as the word of God, not because they're Jewish or because of any merit or skill set of their own.

[7 : 26] In fact, you guys, the disciples were not, they were not the best and the brightest. If you've read the Gospels, you know this, right? It's almost tragicomic sometimes when you're reading the Gospels and you're just thinking, wow, how did you miss this, right?

But it's all of us. And if you're going to choose people to be the representative for a religion, these guys really made no sense. But that's something that really sets Christianity apart, y'all.

Every other religion has some sort of merit piece built in. You do certain works. You behave a certain way. That makes you worthy of salvation. You level up. But with Christianity, salvation rests on the worth and merit of Jesus Christ.

Our salvation isn't based on our quality, but the quality of our Savior. So let's move from grafting to the second action here, abiding.

Abiding. John uses this Greek word for abiding, meno, 11 times in this passage. So that's a good one to look into. And what he means here by this word is really kind of multi-layered.

[8 : 42] Abiding means that Jesus dwells intimately with us. He makes his home in us and we make our home in him. There's a two-way relationship there.

And this intimate dwelling, this homemaking, is what enables us to endure, to persevere, to continue, to rest in him in our faith.

That's the other part of abiding. And the beauty of Jesus' incarnation was that he showed us what this looked like in his relationship with the Father.

He even tells us, everything the Father has given me, I give to you. You can almost hear him in this passage responding to questions that might come up. Like, Jesus, how am I supposed to love you and keep your commands?

How do I do this? And he says, just as I have loved my Father and kept his commands, I've shown you the way, right? And he sends his Holy Spirit to work to make all of this possible in us, to help us

remember all that he said, to guide us into all truth.

[9 : 54] Now, I think a lot of us have questions, right? We're thinking, how do we learn to distinguish God's voice from just all the other clamor, right? That's a great question.

We think, is that me or is that God? I want to hear from God. And friends, I think a lot of learning to hear God, to abide in him, means assuming a posture, a posture of humility and submission and attentiveness that recognizes we are branches dependent on the vine for our entire life.

So do we expect to hear from God? Do we want to hear from God? Do we have conversations with God? In my own life, I would say the days where I feel most attentive to the Lord are the days where I wake up in the morning in a posture of prayer, where I wake up and I immediately recognize I'm totally dependent on you, Lord.

Would you teach me today to abide? Would I hear with your ears and see with your eyes? Would I know your heart and your mind? And then throughout the day, we can kind of check in with him, right?

We can, as things come up, what do you think about that, Lord? What do you think about this situation? How can you love this person through me? What does this mean?

[11 : 22] And he wants to be known. He wants to talk to us. He wants to be part of this with us. And this is something that we're going to continue to just talk about more and more at Church of the Advent. Just this ongoing relationship and hearing from the Holy Spirit.

Now, as part of this concept of grafting and abiding, we also have to talk about verse six. These challenging verses that say we can be thrown away and burned.

This is one of those verses in the Gospels where you're going along and like maybe you're starting to feel some warm fuzzies about Jesus and then all of a sudden it's like, right? It's like a record scratch.

If anyone does not abide in me, he's thrown away like a branch and withers and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned. And, I mean, it says it.

And the thing is, the disciples probably would have felt less jarred by this. And John's Jewish readers would have felt less jarred by this because they would have connected what Jesus is saying here with that passage in Ezekiel and some of these other Old Testament passages that they were steeped in.

[12 : 33] And by making this clear connection, again, Jesus is underscoring this fact. I learned this term, foot stomping. He's helping his disciples and other Jews understand that belief in him grafts them in, not their status as Jews.

And this was an important point to make to people that had always assumed like, oh, being Jewish means that I'm in, right? So like we said earlier, Jesus is expanding the status of his chosen people to everyone, not just Jews.

But I think there's an additional explanation here for us that we need to, that we really need to consider, hinging on those two words, if anyone. So he says that a couple times, if anyone abides in me, right?

He also says, if anyone does not abide in me, right? So just as Jesus is offering salvation to all, he's also being really clear that he's the only way.

Remember, Christianity is exclusive in its savior, but it's inclusive in its salvation. All are invited, but not everyone receives the offer.

[13 : 45] And then there are also some who do receive it initially, but then they fall away. Like Jesus says in the parable of the sower, they receive the word with joy, but then the cares of the world choke it, right?

They don't persevere. And I think this is an important point about abiding. Abiding doesn't only mean a one-time decision. It means an ongoing posture, like we said, of persevering in the faith, continuing in the teachings of Jesus and the apostles, and remembering that everything he said is true.

And Paul says this so beautifully in Colossians 2. Therefore, as you have received Christ Jesus the Lord, so walk in him, rooted and built up in him, and established in the faith, just as you were taught, abounding in thanksgiving.

Okay, so what does abiding look like practically for us? You can't just sit there saying, abide, abide. Okay, now abide harder, right?

It doesn't work that way. But this is where we, as Anglicans, have some beautiful tools to help us abide. We have the Book of Common Prayer, full of Scripture-based liturgy that helps embed the Word of God deep into us as we recite the creeds and we say the collects and prayers together, day after day, week after week.

[15:14] And we have the sacraments, especially the Eucharist. Friends, it's no accident that this whole conversation came on the same night Jesus instituted the Eucharist.

The Eucharist is a tangible means of grace that fuses the spiritual and the physical. And this is why we come to church each week with excitement, knowing that when we come to the Lord's table, we are encountering the risen Christ there.

And the church fathers considered the Eucharist central to life in Christ. One of my favorite Eucharist quotes is by Irenaeus. Just as the bread is transformed spiritually by the prayers of the Eucharist, so are our bodies transformed when they receive communion.

And all of this leads us to our last point. We know that we are connected to the vine and abiding in Christ when we bear lasting fruit.

That's the transformation. And all of that comes through the Spirit. Let's consider three aspects of bearing fruit.

[16:27] First, what does fruit look like? Fruit looks like transformed lives and communities. It looks like that transformation that Irenaeus wrote about. We see all throughout the Gospels and Epistles in the New Testament that the clearest marker of faith, of abiding love, of abiding in the love of Christ is measurable fruit.

Individuals and communities transformed in the love of Christ, marked by love and joy and peace and patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, self-control, compassion, courage, faith, and hope. And one of the things we've been praying about and talking about as a staff at Church of the Advent, and I know many of you are sharing in this prayer with us, is that our church community would be a community marked by that transformation and that we would be able to work on behalf of the common good of everyone around us, whether they share our faith or not.

We just heard from Travis and T.R. Barnwell this morning, missionaries to Thailand, and they're doing this in a community that's largely Buddhist in Chiang Mai. What does it look like for us to do this?

We want, if our church were to suddenly cease to exist in D.C., that the city would be, that people would notice that there would be a loss, that there would be a grief because of that, because we're a community marked by Christ's love.

[17:56] And coming back to Mary Slessor, there were many instances where people didn't actually believe and receive, she didn't have a noticeable convert necessarily, but they loved her because Jesus worked so tangibly through her.

In fact, she was called everybody's mother. They called her Ma. And as branches connected to the vine, Jesus works through us in the same way to care for our friends, our workplaces, our neighborhoods.

And let me just emphasize again that abiding in Christ comes ahead of these things, trying to do these things without abiding. It's like putting cut flowers in a vase.

It might look okay for a little while, but eventually they wither and they die. And that's what it means to try to do these works apart from Christ. It becomes a kind of striving, of white knuckling.

The speaker on our clergy retreat last week that Thomas and I were at, Steve Nicholson, said, if we're ever going to make it to the end, we have to stop trying to make things happen.

[19:06] God is the one who makes things happen. And this illustrates our second point about bearing fruit. Ultimately, God is the one who determines the amount and kind of fruit we bear.

He's the vine dresser. We don't look around at other people and what they're doing to determine the measure and value of our fruit because our value rests in the Lord Jesus Christ. And honestly, this fruit most clearly glorifies God when it's something we could never do on our own.

It's like Paul writes to the Corinthians, I resolved to know nothing while I was with you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness with great fear and trembling.

My message and my preaching were not with wise and persuasive words but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power so that your faith might not rest on human wisdom but on God's power.

Y'all, we don't want to be, we don't want people saying, oh, you're so great. Like, Hillary, you're so great. Like, no, we want people saying Jesus Christ is great. We want the fruit to point people to the

Lord Jesus Christ.

[20 : 18] Christ. Again, Mary Slessor in this violent region, she often was in danger of death but people started noticing her wisdom because of the Holy Spirit and they would call her into these conflicts and she would pray for the peace of Christ as she entered in and she would say, Lord, this task is impossible for me but not for thee.

and again and again the Lord used her. Third and lastly, bearing fruit requires pruning and pruning hurts.

In a physical vineyard, pruning is done for three reasons. To protect against disease, to allow branches to bear more fruit and to help produce the greatest quality of fruit.

And I think this is true for us metaphorically too. I think we tend to think of pruning when we read this passage as like, oh, these are some maybe not great behaviors that the Lord is asking me to give up.

And it can be that. But like I said, in a physical vineyard, it can also mean pruning good fruit. It might mean some good things in our lives get pruned too because God in his goodness knows how he wants to use us.

[21 : 40] He's a good and loving vine dresser. And as Jesus went back to the Father, as he was resurrected and ascended back to the Father, we are the means that he works through to bear fruit.

And sometimes the pruning feels like a measured process. It's like a little clip here, a little clip there. You know, we think it's like kind of gentle, maybe. And we think we're listening to the Lord's invitation.

We're approaching work or relationships or school differently. And that's true. That's true sometimes. But there's another way that branches get pruned. And sometimes that's by disaster. Sometimes that's by a hailstorm, lightning, drought, storms. But an experienced vine dresser knows how to use those things for the good of the vine.

And it's the same way in our lives. these big things that happen. Death, maybe a cancer diagnosis, betrayal, infertility, unwanted singleness, failed marriage.

[22 : 56] This is when we want to scream at God, right? We want to say, this isn't pruning. This feels like an amputation. And friends, I want you to hear me on this.

God does not will suffering to happen to you, but he can wield it for our good and for his glory. He can wield it because he's the master vine dresser, because he loves us and he's for us.

And he wants, he wants people to know that we're his disciples. He wants to bring glory to himself. He uses big and small things to refine and strengthen us.

Another way we could think about this kind of pruning is the concept of the fiery trial that Peter writes about in his letters. He writes that these trials prove the tested genuineness of our faith. More precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

[24 : 04] Again, we want people to see not us but Jesus. Yet not I but through Christ and me. We sing that. And that happens through this pruning process.

What I haven't told you yet about Mary Schlessor was that when she arrived in Nigeria, she was 28 and she almost immediately contracted malaria. and she ministered with regular bouts of fever from malaria for 40 years.

By the end of her life she was so weak that she had to be pushed from village to village in a cart. But she abided in Christ. She continued the work that God had called her to do.

And hundreds of men and women and children were saved physically and spiritually as she ministered both in word and indeed. And I can say that the hardest things in my life and I know probably a lot of you resonate with this the times when I have cried out to the Lord for mercy and I have begged for him to make it stop have also been the times when I've learned what abiding means.

Because those times have a way of loosening our hold on the things that we familiarly use. Right? The familiar means of comfort and they bring us into deeper places of oneness with Christ.

[25 : 28] When we're weak and we have no choice but to depend on him weakness is the way. Philosopher Nicholas Wolterstorff wrote a memoir about his 25 year old son's death in a mountain climbing accident.

It's called Lament for a Son. If you haven't read it it's a beautiful exploration of grief. And he writes suffering is the shout of no by one's whole existence to that over which one suffers.

The shout of no by nerves and gut and gland and heart to pain to death to injustice to depression to hunger to humiliation to bondage to abandonment.

and sometimes when the cry is intense there emerges a radiance which elsewhere seldom appears.

A glow of courage of love of insight of selflessness of faith. And in that radiance we see best what humanity was meant to be.

[26 : 37] This radiance is what it means to bear fruit for God's kingdom. It means to be the person he created you to be to be his disciple to be radiant!

with his glory and to know the completeness of his joy as Jesus says in verse 11. Let's bring this to a close with three final thoughts.

If you're hearing this and you're realizing I'm actually not connected to Jesus I've never been grafted into the vine but I want to be you can pray right where you're sitting Lord Jesus I turn my life over to you please graft me in would you come abide in me help me abide in you and if you do this or if you have questions about it Pastor Thomas and I would love love love to talk to you after this service.

If you have already received Christ if you're grafted into the vine what would it look like for you to abide more deeply in him? Remember abiding is a posture it's an orientation it's a participation in the life of Christ it's not checking boxes and like I said I gave you a couple things about the book of common prayer prayer and I just want to reemphasize the Eucharist I want to reemphasize coming and receiving the life of the Lord at his table that's abiding it looks like patterning our lives after Jesus remember he showed us how to do this and y'all it looks like praying audacious prayers because in verse 7 Jesus says if you abide in me and my words abide in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you so that means we can know the heart and mind of Christ as we abide in him so that means we ask what do you want me to pray for

Lord what do you see and then we pray in agreement with him no matter how big and unlikely the request might seem remember what's impossible for me is not impossible for thee and when we abide in Christ a natural result is that we more easily and naturally abide with others ask the Lord as part of this audacious prayer as you abide in me and I in you who are you calling me to abide with lastly if you're in a season of pruning consider what if the hardest thing in your life is the thing that God could use to produce the most fruit for his kingdom and friends I'm not saying this lightly I know that some of you guys are being really pruned and it hurts and it's hard I know and Jesus knows if you're suffering know that

[29 : 47] Jesus sees you he loves you he suffers with you that he suffered for you but also know this that suffering with him and for him is also a part of abiding and that as we share in his suffering we also share in his joy his true complete and lasting joy abide in him friends let's pray lord thank you that we are connected to you that you are the vine and that we are the branches would our posture be one of joyful submission to you thank you that you are always working for our good and for your glory lord thank you that you are mighty that you are good and that you are powerful and that you can do more than we can ask or think or imagine we love you and if there's anybody here who does not personally know you lord I pray that you would reveal yourself to these people that they would receive you that they would trust you with their lives we pray these things in the name of the father and the son and the holy spirit amen