

Welcome

By the grace of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, welcome to this time of worship and reflection! We are connected by the presence of God’s Spirit as we gather in person or virtually, for wherever two or more are gathered, the Spirit of the Lord is present. May you remember your roots in our Savior today and be refreshed.

Prayer for Illumination

Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, that, as your Scriptures are read and your Word proclaimed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.

John 15:1-8 (NRSV)

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.”

Message: Abide in me

"Have you ever felt a little dry?"

I'm not talking about feeling like a raisin because you spent too much time in the hot sun. I'm talking about times in our lives when our faith seems a little dry. You know, those times when we are living and doing the things we feel we should, but we don't feel very spiritual?

Adie felt that way when she was the lead singer for a Christian band.

"Adie discovered how much busy-ness, even busy-ness created serving God, can hurt a person's relationship with Christ.

'We [the members of the band] worked so hard to pour into others, but we never took time to make sure we were being filled ourselves,' Adie says. 'We didn't even have time to find a church. The first year of touring, we were free two Sundays. I went to church on one, but on the other I was just too exhausted. After three years of this, I thought, "The fruit is no longer here. We're not an encouragement to each other and we're wasting the precious opportunity that the Lord's given us to share with people. We were just dry and that's why I left the band.'"

In 2003, the band came to an end. It was also a new beginning.

Adie left music, married singer/songwriter Jeremy Camp, became a mom and felt strengthened in her faith.

'I honestly didn't think I was going to go back into music,' she says. 'But then I felt God put music back on my heart. I thought, "Oh my gosh, that's crazy. Why now?" I didn't tell anyone. One day, Jeremy said, "I think you should do a solo album." It was so weird because I'd been feeling the same thing.'

When Adie returned to music, she made sure God didn't get pushed to the background by busy-ness. How? Her first key has been daily alone time with God. 'I can't last long without him,' she says. 'It's just so important to be filled by God.'

Second, Adie makes sure that as she's ministering to others, she's also being ministered to. 'It's so important to make sure I'm learning about the Bible from godly people,' she says.

Lastly, she is very careful to keep her priorities straight. ‘I try to prioritize what's most important in order to manage my time,’ she says. ‘And sometimes the most important part of that is taking a step back and saying, “Some things seem urgent right now, but when compared to your eternal relationship with the Lord, they are so less crucial.”’¹

Adie discovered something important that helps all of us. Without a close connection to God, we are setting ourselves up to fail. When we make time to draw closer to God, we open ourselves up to receiving grace in ways we couldn't have imagined before, and growing in ways we can't manage on our own.

Today's Scripture reading from John 15:1-8 is all about the kind of relationship we have with Christ. God has wonderful plans to accomplish through us, collectively and individually.

In John 15:5 Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches.” Vines exist to bear fruit. That's true, literally and figuratively. Do you think the hills in the San Fernando Valley are covered with vines that don't produce fruit? Not at all! As a matter of fact, vine growers do all they can to help the vines to produce the most fruit, of the highest quality. They are planted in the best spot, where the soil is full of nutrients, they make sure to plant the vine where it receives the right amount of moisture and plenty of sunlight.

God, the divine vine grower, does the same thing. God gave us the best vine we could have: Jesus. We were born where we needed to be to accomplish God's plan (the best soil), and given living water through our baptism and affirmation of faith. Best of all, the light of the Son of God shines into our lives each and every day through the Spirit, who personally tends and cares for us. We remember this during communion, when we celebrate God's grace and sacrificial love in the breaking of the bread and in the cup.

What are the fruit? The fruit of the Spirit is “*love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control*” (Galatians 5:22-23). These are qualities we admire in people.

¹ <http://www.christianitytoday.com/iyf/2008/marapr/3.20.html>

A key question is this: do we bear fruit? One of the questions John Wesley often posed about believers was, “do they show evidence of the fruits of God’s grace?” If you think about a grapevine and what it produces, there are only four variations possible: no fruit, some fruit, more fruit and much fruit (vv2,8).

Of these four possibilities, how would you rate yourself spiritually?²

Don’t worry, I’m not going to ask for a show of hands. But I’ll bet a majority of us find we aren’t as fruitful as we could be, or feel we are called to be. Perhaps you said something hurtful this week. Or maybe you sent an email or a text or posted a comment on Facebook that bothered you right after you did it. There are the good ol’ standbys as well: cursing, swearing, gossip and the one-handed freeway salute. Maybe it was more serious: rather than an unintentional outburst, perhaps you intentionally attacked someone else or in some other way turned away from Jesus. I’m not here to make you feel guilty. I’m here to point us to God’s Word, to help us make sense of what we are to do.

What more do we need to grow strong spiritually? John tells us: Jesus. If our spirit relies on Jesus, we will bear fruit. And that’s the only way we can bear fruit. John 15:5 tells us “*Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.*” Our willingness to receive the love and grace of Christ openly, wholly and completely is reflected in the quality of the fruit others see in our lives. If you are willing to turn to Jesus and to continue in an authentic relationship with him, you will bear fruit. It may take a lot of time, spiritual nourishment and some cleansing, but the light of the Son shining in and through your life will bear fruit.

It’s when people are unwilling to turn to Christ, when they separate themselves by their attitude and actions, that sad things happen. If we don’t remain in Jesus, we will end up separated, withered, with no fruit. People who distance themselves from God have a difficult time in life. They are on their own when faced with conflict. Without the intervention and protection of Christ, conflict and stress can consume their lives. That path can only lead to sadness, bitterness and loneliness.

² <http://www.guidепosts.org/bible-resources/get-ready-spiritual-growth-scripture-and-tips-enrich-your-prayer-life>
Material in this and following two paragraphs drawn from Dr. Norman Vincent Peale text cited.

How do we go from ‘some fruit’ to ‘much fruit’? Adie Camp gave us some good tips: spend quiet time alone with God each day; make sure you’re ministered to by others; and keeping your priorities straight. Don’t let the urgency of some things push aside the priority of your daily relationship with Christ. Jesus is the nourishing sap. When we are connected to Christ, we receive divine blessings, intervention, strength for life (John 14:10), which helps us to live spiritually healthy, productive lives.

Jesus said it in a simple way. And he repeated it three times, making sure to emphasize the point: “*abide in me*” (vv4,5,7). In the NIV, it says “remain in me.” Other translations offer “to stand,” “to wait,” “to live,” “to endure,” but also “to continue to be present” or “maintain unbroken fellowship” with Christ. Jesus wants you to live in his presence. Have you ever heard the expression “dance like no one is watching”? Jesus wants you to live your life spiritually and practically in the same way. Jesus is watching, but have no fear: Jesus loves you more than anyone else ever will!

Living wholly, authentically and completely in Jesus’ presence means thinking about him often, praying to him and singing his praises. It also means talking and working with other Christians, who are really his body (Ephesians 5:30). You are connected to Christ when you read his words in the Bible often, when you spend time thinking about them, and when you do what Jesus says.

Above all, God doesn’t want us to leave or depart. If we remove ourselves from the fellowship of Christ, we are removing ourselves from the nourishing sap, the water of eternal life. We become detached, adrift, without association to the beneficial things of life.

Jesus teaches us four things about living in his presence. The first is that God has wonderful plans and you are part of them: he is the vine and we are the branches (v4). Second, God teaches us that when we are with Jesus, Jesus is with us and we will bear much fruit because it is Jesus who helps us to do so (v5).

Third is the promise of John 15:7-8, “*If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My*

Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” When we are with Christ and Jesus’ words are in our heart and mind, we can ask for anything and it will be done. If you really are with Christ, you can ask for whatever you desire as your longings have become those of Christ. We will have the mind of Christ. James 5:16 affirms this: *“the prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective.”* This shows we are Jesus’ disciples, because we will want to do God’s will and we want to act on our faith. Living this way gives glory and honor to God (v8).

The fourth thing Jesus teaches us about abiding gives us power and encouragement! John 15:9,11: *“As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ... I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.”* We are assured Jesus loves us, no matter what. No matter what crisis you will face this week, Jesus will be there, walking alongside you, waiting for you to turn to him. God’s authority and power are unmatched; there is nothing that can keep God’s love and grace from us.

I am greatly encouraged because Jesus leaves us with joy. No where else in the Bible is there a teaching like John 15. I encourage you to read and reflect on the whole chapter this week. Jesus teaches his disciples to have hope because he finds joy in us. Jesus says this so we will find joy, fully and completely, because we are assured God loves us. Deep down, way past the hurt, pain, guilt and shame, there’s hope because God loves us with a love that cannot be denied. God’s love will nourish us in the deepest darkness. It will guard our spirit when darkness and evil close in. God’s love sustains and carries us for there is nothing that can deny it, not even death! And, deep down, where it may be hidden from view by others, we can find joy in knowing Jesus loves us. **Let us abide in him.**

A Blessing

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.