

May 2, 2021 Easter 5B
John 15:1-8
I Need an Abiding App

I spend a lot of time on my phone. And I have these apps that can be very useful...or very distracting. I have an App that I can point at the sky and it can tell me what constellation I'm looking at.

I polled some of my friends this week and asked what their most unusual apps were and what their most helpful apps were. The unusual ones were...well, unusual. Like an app that allows you to take a picture of your Lego creations and put them on backdrop of any place in the world.

Most of the Apps that people listed as most useful had to do with connection—connection to friends, to work, to the bank.

What if we could come up with an app that keeps us connected to Jesus all the time? Would we use it?

Let's back up. I wonder if we are willing to abide (to use the word from our Gospel reading) in anything, to immerse ourselves wholly in something, to allow anything to captivate our heart and life, to view our whole existence through that one lens . . .

At first I want to say, no, no one would be willing to give of him or herself in that way. It sounds too constricting.

But then I begin to think about the many things that we give ourselves to: our jobs, our families, our hobbies, interests, or activities.

I begin to think about the things that we spend our time doing, the things that we give our lives to.

Many of us are sports fans, we dress up, we go to games, and we make the time. Some of us love our television programs, so we sit there and even "binge-watch." We cannot wait for the next season to begin again.

So as it turns out, we are constantly abiding--constantly living in, taking residence in, fixing ourselves permanently on, many things in our lives. Our abiding speaks to our rooting, and it turns out that we are rooting in different ways every day. We do so every moment of our lives.

We kid ourselves if we think that those things that root us are not affecting us, shaping us, and transforming us. The proof of our shaping is evident all around us. That which we value, which we spend our time doing, the activities that we engage in, our attitudes and ways of engagement, all speak

to the things that captivate our hearts. These things are the fruit of our abiding, the fruit of our rootedness.

All we have to do is pay attention to our daily smartphone notifications to recognize the fruit of our abiding . . . violence, objectification of neighbor, systemic prejudice, greed, and our incessant consumption speak to our hunger.

Where are we abiding? What's our rootedness? Are we truly rooted? Are we truly abiding in Jesus? Are we letting Jesus abide in us?

This is a difficult question. I struggle just thinking about it. It seems like it would be an easy answer. I want to say, "Of course, I abide in Jesus. Of course, Jesus abides in me!"

This seems like the answer that any good Christian would give. A good answer for a pastor . . . right?!

But if I am honest, I have to recognize that often I do not abide in Jesus and I'm not alone.

We abide . . . oh, we abide in things that we think we can control, then they end up controlling us.

We abide in things that require little of us, but they end up taking our souls.

Abide in the security of my small ideas about God, and they end up making me more anxious than ever, with every contrary opinion an enemy and every enemy beyond redemption.

Our abiding seems fruitful; our vines seem healthy. They might even be producing fruit, but is it good fruit?

- Fruits of idolatry, self-importance, and self-righteousness.
- Fruits of a near-sighted view of the world where God only loves those that we love, and where God hates like we hate.
- Fruits of control, over our lives and over others.
- Fruits that keep us from paying attention to the needs of others, that keep others at arm's length.
- Fruits that refuse to put ourselves in the place of the other and to live alongside them.

It is hard having to face the reality that what we have produced is truly not fruit but weeds, of how "overgrown" everything is around us . . . how truly un-rooted and unfruitful it is, how unwilling we are to face our reality, to be pruned, to have anyone, anything, question our fruitfulness. In other words, we fool ourselves, when in reality all that stuff that comes from me is not

fruit at all; it's just weeds, it's just weeds. These weeds keep me from experiencing the grace that God has given me, that these weeds that I have confused with fruit are not allowing me to move forward and to grow in love of God and neighbor.

One of the key places where I see the weediness mistaken for fruitfulness is in the unhealthy rhetoric of our day. In our civic life, in social media engagement, and in our personal conversations, we have become divisive; we have become unwilling to listen, unwilling to see other points of view. We have couched this weediness in talk around what is right, truth, in our own desire for a "so-called" better life; but in the end we have questioned the motives of others, we have called others names, we have made caricatures of the positions of others, and have become peddlers of untruth. All this shows us that none of this is truth. None of this is abiding in Jesus. None of this!

How are you doing with fruits of, say, loving your neighbor?

We should be convicted, for Christ gives us an invitation: Christ says, "Come and open yourself up to being grafted to me. I have strong roots. I have the DNA needed to make you fruitful, alive, and to make us flourish, to make all of creation flourish."

Jesus calls us to be rooted in him.

The gospel shows us a new way, and shows us the beauty of fruitful abiding, of God's call to new life. We must be willing to get in front of that mirror; we must be willing to see that what we are calling fruitfulness is nothing but weeds. We must see that we are really not abiding in Jesus; instead, we are abiding in our own sense of self. Only then will we be able to see what it looks like to let God clear the way so that we can live a fruitful life. The process is not easy; it requires a dramatic vulnerability, a willingness to let go. It requires our willingness to find a new home and a new center.

So Jesus provides us with the way. Our following Jesus grafts us, cuts us from our rootedness in sin and death, the unhealthy roots of the human condition and then allows us to live a new life. Jesus then becomes our root, our vine, with God the Father being the one that grows it, tends it, and makes sure that it is healthy and whole! We are then invited to be the branches. The flowering and visible presence of Jesus in the field of God's kingdom!

So imagine what that looks like! Imagine our commitment as followers of Jesus to allow the Holy Spirit to graft us into Christ, to allow the nurturing, energetic, and fruitful presence of Jesus to be the source of life for us.

In order for this reality to happen, we must abide; in order for our branches to be fruitful, we must allow for this re-location, transplantation, and transformation to occur, to happen, in us.

We are seeing again and again our need to re-calibrate our lives into fruitfulness rooted in our abiding, in our changing of address, in the permanence of God's identity as love. Making our home in God, inhabiting God's place, living into Christ's identity, requires that we acknowledge our need to be grafted to Jesus. A here's the Good News. This is Jesus' job and He has already done it and done it perfectly. The True Vine allowed himself to be cut off and thrown into the fire. He rose from those ashes on the third day and declared us eternally saved, eternally forgiven, eternally His! Nothing can change that. We, by the incredible power of the cross, are forever grafted to Jesus.

At St. Matthew, we are committed to being a people who are known by love, who live by faith and who are a voice of hope. These things are the fruit of our abiding in Jesus.

This is difficult work, but I believe that we must live in this way. We must be willing to engage the difficult conversations of our day; we must be willing to abide in the midst of the difficulty--that's where Jesus would live--and allow the fruit of our abiding, the love and grace of Jesus, to be made known in our communities.

Now more than ever, God's people must lead the way into conversations that uplift, conversations that restore, conversations that renew, conversations that reconcile, conversations that honor the image of God in the other.

It is my prayer today that we can begin a movement, a movement of people committed to being agents of reconciliation, committed to a movement rooted in Jesus, a movement that inhabits the way of Jesus and that allows for the way of Jesus to inhabit the world. A movement of "abiding fruitfulness" that shines a light on God's reconciling love in Jesus and in the world.