

Growing with One Another

Our Family Values:

1 Corinthians 12:7, Ephesians 4:15-16

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In the 15th chapter of the gospel of John, Jesus says:

I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing. (John 15:5, NKJV)

When Jesus taught his disciples for the last time, he told them that their fruitfulness depended upon their abiding in him. He continued:

If anyone does not abide in Me, he is cast out as a branch and is withered; and they gather them and throw them into the fire, and they are burned. If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, you will ask what you desire, and it shall be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit; so you will be My disciples. (John 15:6-8, NKJV)

Jesus made it clear that the growth, success and life of every person depends on their relationship with Jesus. Indeed, Jesus used an interesting word to characterize that critical relationship. We translate it *abide*, which means to live, or *remain*, which means *don't depart* or *stay connected*.

Jesus says we will be fruitful if we abide or remain in him, and he abides and remains in us. He says we will bring honor to God, be very fruitful and through prayer experience fulfillment of our desires if we stay connected with Christ and his words live in us. The Apostle Paul emphasized in his letters to several churches the importance of being in Christ and Christ being in us.

Today, I want us to know and experience what it means to abide in the vine as Jesus taught, to be in Christ as Paul wrote. I want us to both understand and taste a life-changing spiritual relationship with Jesus.

Have any of you seen actress Jodie Foster in the 1994 movie *Nell*? Jodie played Nell, a girl who lived in deep isolation in a North Carolina cabin with her paralyzed mother and twin sister. During the movie we discover that Nell's twin sister died when she was young and that the paralyzed mother, who raised her, was speech impaired. Consequently, Nell cannot talk properly but speaks in a language of her own making and mimics some slurred words of her mother. Jodie's character Nell reflects some of the difficulties of feral children. Feral children are human beings who were separated from human contact as babies or toddlers and somehow survive. In some cases they were cared for by other creatures in the wild. I've read of 19 documented cases since 1980. Some for years are locked by a demented adult in a basement with some animals. Others are found in wilderness areas where disease or war removed them from human contact. In each case there are profound physical, emotional and relational challenges. Commonly, they die young and require extraordinary amounts of attention and care.

I thought of *Nell* and these feral children when I considered abiding in Christ because Jesus makes it plain that he works through a human community. Jesus said that wherever two or three are gathered in his name, he is in the midst of them. Jesus can be known and experienced wherever two or three gather in his name. Indeed, Jesus taught that our relationships with one another are critical to our relationship with God. He taught that if a person presents a gift in God's temple and remembers how he or she sinned against a neighbor, the person should stop and make things right with the neighbor first and then return to present the gift. Key to our fellowship with God is our relationship with one another. God raises us physically in families and God raises us spiritually in his family. We disconnect from Jesus when we disconnect from the relationships he gives us in his church. If you and I are going to abide in Jesus, if we are going to remain in him, then we cannot separate from his family. We must go through the good

times and the hard times together. We must achieve together and suffer together. We must rejoice and mourn together. Key to being in Christ is being with his people.

Now we know that there are different kinds of families. There are healthy families where every member grows in knowledge, wisdom, love and health. There are unhealthy families where members succumb to bitterness, fear, ignorance, addiction or apathy. Showing up is not enough. What we do as a family matters. How we handle situations matter. What we believe matters. What commands our attention, decides our priorities and determines our practices is critical. Even as a key to being in Christ is being with his people, his people must be in him. We dare not wander off. We dare not give God mere lip service.

When children fail to communicate with their parents, when they fail to receive instructions, feedback and encouragement, the household quickly becomes chaotic and unhealthy. Children need time with their parents. When parents fail to partner with their children in household and developmental tasks, their children do not learn and grow in the abilities and priorities that cause them to flourish. So how does God raise us as healthy children who reflect well on his parenting? He assembles us together as his church to seek him and serve him. There are two central activities critical for us to live and grow in Christ. First, we must be on our faces and knees before God in repentance and faith and seek him together; and second, we must get up on our feet with God in repentance and faith and serve him together. That is our business. Truly, that is all our business. We have no other business.

Even when you are out making a living or at home raising your children, you are not to be separated from your Father who works through your Christian family. There are spiritual gifts in your Christian family through which God helps you work, manage your household, invest in your children and bless your neighbors. Christian fellowship is not limited to

assembling for worship, visiting over coffee in a church building, staging a water fight at a church picnic or discussing the Bible in a study. It actually means partnering in life's tasks and challenges together, and that partnering includes the benefit of the spiritual gifts God gives the people in your church family. I've been given some spiritual gifts to benefit you; however, God wants you to know:

A spiritual gift is given to each of us as a means of helping the entire church. (1 Corinthians 12:7, NLT)

You have a spiritual gift that God gave you to instruct, equip or strengthen the entire church. Consequently, if either you or I don't have the faith to embrace your spiritual gift, I for certain and possibly you will suffer a loss of potential and fruitfulness. Do you understand that?

A core understanding and commitment of Bethany is:

Growing with One Another: *We value the fellowship and ministry of every believer, and an atmosphere of acceptance and mutual accountability, through which we develop our spiritual gifts, grow in servant leadership and unite in Christ.*

We need fellowship with every believer that God gives us. We need ministry from every believer God gives us. We need to partner as we minister so that the spiritual gifts that embody the wisdom and love of God make us fruitful. Through your faith and spiritual gift Jesus joins us in work. Through your faith and spiritual gift Jesus joins us in worship.

Truly, you and I are on our faces and knees before God in repentance and faith when we genuinely worship together, pray together, study the Bible together, listen to Christian teaching, and gather at special times to seek God. In each case, your spiritual gift is important to hearing God. Therefore, we need to accept, expect and inspect the use of your spiritual gift so that we all grow together in hearing God. We need an atmosphere of acceptance so we embrace your spiritual gift, and we need mutual accountability so that we develop and grow from your spiritual

gift. Similarly, you and I are on our feet with God in repentance and faith when we serve God together empowered by the spiritual gifts he has given each of us. As you use your spiritual gift, you act as a servant leader. You bless God's people with your service and influence others. Influence is leadership. Consequently, with your service you lead people to awareness and decisions they would have never made. As you use your spiritual gift, you help us unite in Christ so that his love and work spread.

Please understand that God has given you a spiritual gift to help the entire church seek and serve God. Will you recognize and use it, or will we all suffer a loss in our potential and power?

Jesus expects us to stay connected to him as the vine of life and redemption. In response to your faith and through his Spirit, he has given you a gift that will reveal God to those seeking and serving him. He has fit you together with other believers for that purpose. Through the Spirit at work in St. Paul, Jesus gave these words to you and me:

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.
(Ephesians 4:16, NIV)

Are some of you suffering discouragement? You suffer because you are not welcoming the spiritual gift of those God has fitted you with and given special faith. Are some of you stuck in confusion or defeat? Are you seeking Christ and availing yourself of the spiritual gifts God has placed in your spiritual family to reveal his answers or empower you in his service? Has your unbelief isolated you from your spiritual family, or has it caused you to withhold what God has given you to bless your brothers and sisters? Are you staying connected with Christ in seeking him and in serving him?

Child of God, unlike Nell and feral children, God raises you in a family. Believe it!