

“Where do you live?” It’s a simple question, but the answer is important. We teach our young children where they live, so they would be able to get help to find their way home. Even pets can return to where they live from amazing distances. In the movie *Homeward Bound*, two dogs and a cat make their long and adventure-filled way back home, when no one thought they’d ever be seen again.

No matter how exciting a vacation trip has been, it’s a comfort to find our way back home. So, how do we find our way to our *spiritual* home? We might be able to program our street address into our smart phone, if we’re smart enough, but it is not as easy to answer the question: “Where do you live, *spiritually*?” Where do you abide, or, to play a little with that word, we might say, where is your spiritual abode? Not “where do you hang your hat,” but “where do you hang your *heart*?” In our Gospel lesson today, Jesus encourages us to hang our hearts on him, knowing that we draw our life energy from his love. Jesus wills for us to live, bearing good fruit energized by that love. “*Abide in me as I am abiding in you.*”

If we want to be “*at home in God*,” we need to ask ourselves: “*Where does God abide?*” One of the places I visited in the Holy Land some years ago was the site of Shiloh, where the Ark of the Covenant rested in the Tabernacle tent for 369 years. The tribes of ancient Israel thought that God lived there. But God’s true abode is not a *place* like a tent, or the four walls and a roof where you sleep and eat and keep your stuff. God’s abode is not limited to a spot like your backyard garden where the hopefully well-pruned roses thrive. And even though we call it “*God’s house*,” God is certainly not confined to *these* walls. Yes, God promises to be here, in this place where the pruning hook of God’s Word shapes us, and the fruit of the vine at God’s welcome table sustains us, as living branches of the Jesus Vine. We know that God promises to be among us as we gather here to worship on Sunday, and we seek to see and hear what God is doing--healing, forgiving, juicing up the branches -*that’s us* - giving us confidence and strength to branch out again and bear good fruit.

So, here’s a question: *where is God on Monday?* Where does God live, out in our weekday, workaday world? *God is alive and at work wherever love is being put into action.* Love can be a parent gently rocking a crabby child to sleep; it can be one friend patiently being there for another, ready to encourage and to forgive. God’s care can also be a carpenter making the best cabinet that he can, or a teacher focusing her attention on that one really quiet child with a sad face or being patient with the wild one who just can’t seem to sit still.

God’s Monday love at work can be a person playing a faithful part in the social and economic structures of our community and our world. God’s Monday love in action can be joining with others to speak out against injustice and wrestling together to explore and encourage wise and fair public policies. When we hang our hearts on God, as we head out of this place and into our Monday world, God goes with us, within us, wherever our Mondays take us. “*God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.*” That’s where we get to hang our hearts, relying on God’s love, as branches drawing life from the vine-- Jesus the true Vine is what ties us all together, what gives us our identity and enables the fruit that comes from our life together.

This section of the Gospel of John is part of Jesus' final farewell to his disciples. Jesus prays for their life in the world after Jesus is no longer *physically* present with them. Jesus speaks to *us* as well, here and now, not just to those gathered in the Upper Room with him on the night of his arrest.

So, *we* are also meant to hear those difficult words about pruning. Jesus wants us to know that the way would not be easy. Pruning times would come, Jesus says, but those times don't mean that God has somehow given up on us. No. Jesus Christ knows all about those things that divert our energy, things that keep the branches from producing good fruit. Using the image of the vine and the vine keeper, Jesus tells us that God lops off the dead bare branches and carefully prunes the rest; God will work to enable our fruit-bearing, even when we are feeling only the sharp blade of the pruning shears.

Followers of Christ can expect to encounter resistance from out there -- *the world*--and also to do battle in *our own hearts* with temptations that would lure us away from our spiritual home. We find ourselves striving to promote our life on our own terms with worldly expectations, instead of looking and linking only to the vine which is Jesus Christ. The only way that the followers of Jesus Christ can truly prevail in these struggles is to *hang our hearts on Jesus* and entrust ourselves to the one who died and rose again for our sake, and who now abides in us. We remember with prayer and thanksgiving that everything we are and everything we have comes from God.

This image of the branches drawing life from the vine in order to bear fruit is a wonderfully apt picture of stewardship, what we DO with God's gifts after we SAY "*I believe.*" It presents an ongoing opportunity to respond to God's love by claiming and cultivating the spiritual fruits that God has in mind for us to produce in our lives together in mission.

Living out our love for God --this is the *first and most basic* commandment. But this must never be separated from the flip side—our love for God is enacted in our love for our neighbors. The Spirit of Jesus Christ gracefully gives this fruit, new life in the Christ who abides in us. But when we forget who we are—and we all do, sometimes-- and cling to self-serving agendas, we let ourselves get side-tracked, bushwhacked by the Evil One.

What kind of fruit does God look for in the branches? Well, works that reflect God's gracious hospitality-- hope-filled lives that invite and graciously welcome others into a connection with God. The branches get all the juice of life from the Jesus Vine. Through our trust in the loving promise of the presence of Jesus, we're connected to God, even when the pruning comes. Jesus the Vine connects us to our life-giving Root. Jesus abides in us—*that's* where God is on Monday.

Jesus promises that a heart that listens to God will also be heard by God. "*Because you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" This isn't a blank check for selfish indulgence, but it is a promise that God will be active transforming our world through Jesus at work in the gathered people of God.

God the spiritual vine-dresser, prunes the branches. We could spend a whole lot of energy resisting this pruning, wondering why last season's comfortable old branches must give way to make room for the promised growth, which may be only beginning to emerge. But God's pruning shapes us into the creatures and the communities we have the potential to be fruitful; so, here's the deal. We don't have to be defensive or afraid, because "*Perfect love casts out fear.*" With a caring and competent vinedresser at work pruning, the branches will produce as they were planned and planted to do. We can trust that; we can live there every day.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches. They who abide in me, and I in them, it is they that bear much fruit, for apart from me, you can do nothing."* Where even two or three are gathered in Jesus' name, the blessed and beloved branches are planted and pruned, watered and fed---empowered to bear gracious fruit for God. God will always tend and bless this fruit of love. So, God give us the grace to know and trust the life of the vine, even in times of pruning. The one necessary thing that gives us our life and purpose is our connection to Jesus, crucified and risen for the life of the world. God, give us good fruits, and the courage to trust putting our lives in the loving care of the vinedresser. Show us each day where God can be at work, in us and through us, so we can bear the fruit of God's love in our Monday world.