

Americans are known for having a fierce sense of independence, freedom, and self-identity, and we have taken pride in promoting freedom for people, not only here but also around the world. However, as we have seen throughout this Covid-19 pandemic, there is in this country a growing interpretation of individual freedom that has morphed into something that is unhealthy, toxic, and malignant as we now see people who feel their **individual** freedom is more important than their responsibility **to** and **for** the care of **neighbor**. This growing vein of thought has become a cancer in our culture, and it is also something that runs completely **contrary** to Jesus' teaching. If you claim to be a Christian, and if you claim to follow the way of Jesus, such thinking is the **antithesis** of the way you are called to live. Today, our scripture readings teach us just how contrary such thinking is to what Jesus actually teaches.

I love what Nadia Bolz-Weber says as she reflects upon people's sense and perception of individual independence, and the challenge we find in today's gospel reading. She writes:

I'm nothing if not independent. Reportedly my first sentence was "Do it self!" Yes, I will do it myself, thank you. See I want choices. And I want independence....What I **wish** Jesus said is: "I am whatever you want me to be. And you can be whatever you want to be: vine, pruner, branch, soil....knock yourself out." What Jesus **actually** said is: "**I** am the vine. My Father is the vine grower. **You** are the

branches.” Dang. The casting has already been finalized. Vines, and branches off of vines, are all tangled and messy and it’s just too hard to know what is what...Not only are we **dependent** on Jesus, but our lives are uncomfortably tangled up **together**. The Christian life is a vine-y, branch-y, jumbled mess of **us** and **Jesus** and **others**. Christianity is a lousy religion for the “do it self!” set.

Yes, Christianity is a lousy religion for the “do it self” set. And, **nowhere** does Jesus teach more clearly that we are **not** independent do-it-yourselfers than here in today’s gospel reading. You see, nowhere does Jesus demonstrate more clearly that we **cannot** go it alone, that we **cannot** pull ourselves up by our bootstraps when life puts us down, and that it is completely unreasonable to expect anyone else to either. Today’s gospel reading is all about being **connected** to the vine, **remaining connected** and **staying connected** throughout this **life** journey we **all** are traveling **together**. It is **not** about individual, personal independence. It is **not** about doing it alone, thinking “me do it myself,” or I can do anything I darn well please.

As we enter today’s gospel, we find ourselves back on that evening of Maundy Thursday in John’s account of the Jesus story. Jesus knows he is about to die and leave the disciples behind. So, he urges them to remain **in** him, stay connected **to** him, and remain in fellowship **with each other**. Jesus is clearly saying to the disciples and to each one of us, “Stay connected. Live in relationship to me. And, stay connected and live in

relationship to **each other**. Make your home in me just as I do in you. Continue on in my teaching and example and **remain** in **fellowship** with **each other**.” And, he gives us this wonderful image of the vine and branches.

Now, if we think about wild grapevines, or any vine for that matter, one thing we soon realize is that vines and branches are tangled and messy. They are invasive, they can take over trees and even pull branches of trees down. They can become a very tangled, **destructive mess** when in the wild and untended. Yet, when we look at a cultivated grapevine, we can see that the vine grower has put an anchor to the main vine. The branches are sorted out, trained and even disciplined. There is a wire structure that supports the vine from below and from above. All the dead branches have been removed. And, the vines and branches that are cultivated end up producing large quantities of grapes.

With this image Jesus shares, he shows us that Christ is the source of all life. Our very existence is dependent on God, who nurtures and cultivates us. **We are not and cannot** be the vine that gives life to all. Neither are we the vine grower, the one who cultivates, stakes, supports and yes, prunes the branches, though sometimes we try to claim this

authority. We are the **branches** and, if we are to flourish, we need to stay **connected** to the **vine**, **abide**, and remain **dependent on** the vine.

To **abide** is all about remaining, staying, taking up residence, and making one's own self at home. It is about living in the community of Christ, participating in the life of that community, and staying connected to that community. When we **abide** in Christ, God's love is perfected in our lives. When we abide in Christ, **love** grows in us, casting out fear and hatred, and empowering us to act boldly.

Abiding in Christ means **admitting** that we are **not** independent, do-it-yourselfers who can boast saying, "Me do it myself," or "I did it my way," or "Having freedom means I can do whatever I want, regardless of how it affects my neighbor." Abiding in Christ means accepting that we **are** dependent on **Christ** and on **each other**. It means graciously receiving the support Christ offers us, most often through the caring of our brothers and sisters. It **also** means consenting to be pruned. It means letting go of the things that hinder our growth in love, things like fear, hatred, greed, jealousy, grudges, resentment, shame, guilt, and all the other invasive, vine-like, tangled things that mess us all up. And, abiding in Christ is **always** about belonging, belonging to the One who gives us life, life that truly matters. You see, this abiding in Christ is **all** about **relationship**.

The relational **connectedness** Jesus is speaking of is a connectedness that is **only** found through experiencing life together within the context of a faith community. And, yes, living in this kind of relationship, abiding in Christ, and staying connected to Christ the true vine, means it is **not** always going to be comfortable **or** easy. It can be difficult. Living in relationship with others requires give and take. Such living requires us to be vulnerable. Living in relationship with others means there will be ups and downs as we travel this journey together. You see, living life together in community means we have to put up with real people, some who are nice and some who are not, some who want things their way and others who don't want to challenge the status quo. Quite frankly, life together means having to put up with people who are sometimes jerks. And, we must be very honest about something – it also means recognizing and having to admit that sometimes **we** are the ones who are being the jerks. The truth is, real, authentic community is something we often would rather shy away from because it can be uncomfortable, and it goes against our malignant perception of independence and individual freedom. And, because we do not like to be uncomfortable, we are sometimes like a little child who says, “Me do it myself, I don't need anyone else.”

However, today Jesus invites **us** to be **real**, to be deeply connected, to be planted in the very life of God and live in intimate relationship with **him and with each other**. Jesus invites us to be honest about who we are and what we are. Jesus invites us to come together and confess our hopes and fears, to share our dreams and disappointments, to be honest about our accomplishments **and** our failures, to be open about our blessings **and** our sin, and to be **dependent** on Him. In Jesus, we are invited **into** deep, authentic relationship with one another so that we can discover we are **accepted, loved, and forgiven by God** who loves this whole world enough to send God's own Son.

It is by being **connected**, being planted in God, and participating in Christian community, that we learn what real **love** is all about. When we stay connected to the vine and live **together** in authentic Christian community, the love that happens and is born enables us to then love **all others** – not just some, and to **love our neighbor** as we ourselves have been loved. It is that kind of love that brings others in and grafts them to the vine. And, it is **that** kind of love that sends us **out** to make a difference in people's lives both here and around the world as **love and life that truly matters** become the **fruit** of living in relationship to God and all others.