

Daily Devotional, April 8, 2021 Remaining in God & in God's Community

Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. John 15:4-5 (NIV)

The late Fred Craddock, preacher and teacher of preaching, tells a story of the early days in his ministry when he was sent to the Appalachian Mountains of East Tennessee to do the work of a pastor. In those days it was common, he says, for the Vacation Bible School to last two weeks. Craddock spoke of one year, in the midst of Vacation Bible School, the material that was sent to them was on Nature and seeing God in creation and in the world. It was all well and good, he said, except he ran out of material by the third day.

The material wasn't very deep, there wasn't much there to go on. Craddock had the group, that was called *Juniors*, a group of 10-13 year-olds. Fred got this great idea. Since the theme was on nature, and they were in a rural area, he had an idea. He told them, I'll ring the bell once, and you kids go out and find something that reminds you about God. After you find it, I'll ring the bell a second time, and you can bring it back and share.

Craddock says that after he rang the bell, and they ran off, he initially had no intention to ring the bell a second time. He relented, however, and rang the bell to call them back to the group. The kids all lined up with something in their hand. One little boy had a rock in his hand. "What does this tell us about God?" he asked. "That God is stout and strong," he stated. "Good", Fred remarked.

The next little girl had a flower in her hand. "What does this tell us about God?", he asked. "That God is pretty," she stated. "Great," he said. Another girl had some huckleberries in her hands. "And what do these huckleberries tell us about God?", Fred inquired. "That God feeds the birds that fly, and us," the girl replied. "Excellent," Fred stated.

Finally, Craddock comes to Jimmy. He remarks that Jimmy was one of those boys that when he was absent, everyone kind of sighed of relief. But Jimmy was standing there, and in his hand was the small hand of his first-grade sister. "So what does that tell you about God?", Fred asked.

Jimmy thought for a moment, dug his toe in the ground, and said, "I don't know." His sister snatched her hand away and said, "Jimmy, your silly" and ran off...

Remain, is the word Jesus uses for his disciples, even as he is preparing to leave the earth. Remain is a simple word, it makes for an excellent theme, but what does the word really involve, and furthermore, what does it mean for us as the body of Christ?

What we find, is that to remain in Christ, we have to break free from many of our cultural norms that we have allowed to grow over time. We have been formed in a society that has led us to believe that everything is about the individual experience. It's all about having everything you want, the way you want it. Yet, even as we begin to get things when we want, the way we want, what we find is that there is an emptiness inside of us still, that needs to be filled. The call of Jesus to remain reminds us that what we are missing is community. A community that remains in Christ and remains together.

Right now, that seems harder than ever, I have even seen a remark that this time is like being a teenager all over again: gas is cheap, but we're grounded and can't leave the house. We long for community and relation, we long to remain. But even as we're separate, I know we can bear much fruit as we continue to reach out to one another, check on one another, and care for one another. And also to keep looking for God in this world.

Jimmy came back when the bell rang, and in his hand was the hand of his little sister, and what does this tell us about God? God wants us to be together, to abide as one body, as one people, and one communion as we remain in His love, and to go out and find those whom God would have us nurture in this same love.

Lord God, as we seek you, we also seek to be with others again, as the community of saints united under Your care. We wish to remain close to Your heart, and pray that we will soon be able to gather with those we love, knowing that you are there in our midst and guiding our footsteps. In Christ, Amen.