



TOUCH POINT

God's Love Burns – Touchpoint for April 24, 2024

John 15:1-8 (NRSVUE) Jesus the True Vine

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. ⁵ I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Peace to you in the name of the Mystery in whom we live and move, and have our being.

I'm struggling with the thought that branches who are not abiding in Christ and who do not produce fruit will be cut off, wither, and burned. Man, that's harsh! It does not fit my present theological understanding of a loving, enduring God. It does fit my old theology of a conditional, punishing God who is waiting for me to get it together and becomes tired. Yet, I'm compelled to seek the hidden meaning in these scriptures rather than throw up my hands and become agnostic about it all. To me, intimacy with God is everything. This is where I'm driven to stare into the loving eyes of God and ask for a glimpse of clarity into this disheartening analogy.

For a person, like me, who has abandonment issues, it is upsetting to hear phrases like 'being cut off and thrown away,' not to mention 'fired.' I advise my spiritual directees that, when something disturbs them, they must give it attention and see what questions arise. This is part of abiding. I guess I'll need to take my own suggestion on this one.

Jesus said, "Abide in me as I abide in you." To me the logical inference is Christ is already abiding in me *prior* to this invitation to abide in Christ. It clearly does *not* say, if you abide in me, *then* I will abide in you. Perhaps we are being invited to sup with Christ, to engage with Spirit, to become consciously aware of this Divine Presence in us; this eternal inhabitation of the Mystery we call God, who inhabits us, walks with us, and empowers us in Spirit. Perhaps the first hearing of this analogy of vines and branches cut off and burned should indeed provoke a sense of death. It is disturbing; it has such finality to it.

Doesn't this happen to all of us? Dust to dust and ashes to ashes, so to speak. Perhaps it reinforces the idea that God will make all things new. Maybe the flipside is that all things old will go away. How wonderful would it be if all that is destroyed is part of God's refining fire, and this passage is not a conclusion, but rather a Part Two in the pruning process.

Maybe, it's a final blow to a resistance to change, a burning down of obstacles that prevented intimacy with the vine. The one in whom God abides!

What if all that is evil gets destroyed in a fire and all that remains is oneness with God, as was intended?

If a fruit-bearing bush is not producing fruit, it might be because it is already dead or has a progressive prideful disease. This life with God's help simply removes all the obstacles once and for all.

So, Jesus, you're saying there's a chance for the "bad guys"?

Whenever I say God's grace is unconditional, someone will invariably ask, "What about Hitler?" I used to evade the question with "Hey, that's up to God." Probably, because I really would prefer a burning up of the dude along with many others I deem evil. Good thing it's up to God!

It takes fecundity to produce the offspring of joy and the fruit of the Spirit. This wonderfully provocative word, *fecundity*, means the ability to produce an abundance of offspring or new growth.

Branches are connected to the vine and they abide together. *Fecundity* is the intimacy of abiding with the vine and each other. The vine is rooted in love below the earth, in what is called the rootstalk. It is the source of all growth and renewal. Branches cannot renew themselves separately from the vine and rootstalk. No wonder Jesus says, "Apart from God, we can do nothing."

In the movie *A Walk in the Clouds*, Paul (Keanu Reeves) is on his way home from war when he sees a girl with a suitcase walking along the road. Victoria is coming home with news that she is unmarried and pregnant. She asks Paul if he will temporarily pose as her husband, and then leave her after a couple of days. He reluctantly agrees. The family owns a vineyard. After several attempts to leave the vineyard and head home, he is intercepted by the intuitive grandfather (Anthony Quinn), asking him to share a drink with him. Paul begins to see he has fallen in love with Victoria. Though he is liked by the grandfather, he is despised by Victoria's father. He, too, is intuitive and smelled something fishy from the start. Paul decides to stay, at the grandfathers urging, and win her over. Paul helps with the harvest, but gets into a physical fight with the father. During the fight, one of the lanterns is knocked off a table and bursts into flames, spreading fire through the vineyard and destroying their livelihood. After hours of battling the fire by waving t-shirts and throwing buckets of water, they give up (I think it was an opportunity for Keanu Reeves, as executive director, to take off his shirt).

Faces charred, they sit in shocked silence. Paul remembers how the grandfather had taken him to an enclosed area where the vineyard's rootstalk laid below the ground. He told him it was the lifeblood of the vineyard.

This is a story of romance. Just like Paul and Victoria's father, we learn that we are not the vine grower. The source of all life is in the rootstalk beneath it all.

God invites us to fall in love with the life we have. We all share a life birthed from the ashes of spiritual ignorance which descended into pride, and the worship of self, as its main existence. "I am the owner of the vineyard," we say. When branches lose their intimacy with the Divine, they are subject to God's burning love. Fire, like pruning, makes rebirth possible. Love remains when all things pass away.

God's love burns for his people as the film's father did for Victoria. The fire of wrath is a refining fire, not a punishment. The source of love lies in the rootstalk, and is eternal. It cannot be destroyed. We are invited to draw life from it every day.

All of humanity has access to the lifeblood of the rootstalk. Fruit is born when fecundity is enjoyed by the vine and the branches. Cheers to the vine grower whose love burns for his people. **Amen.**

Opening Songs

Be Still

(The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Be still, know that I am God

Spirit Divine

(Keith Duke)

Spirit of love, enfold and teach us; Spirit of peace, rest deep within;
Spirit of change, transform and heal us; Spirit divine; Spirit divine.

Bible Passage

(A passage takes us from one place to another)

Touchpoint

(Where God's story touches our life story)

Healer of Our Every Ill

(Marty Haugen)

Refrain: Healer of our ev'ry ill, light of each tomorrow,
give us peace beyond our fear, and hope beyond our sorrow.

- 1 You who know our fears and sadness, grace us with your peace and gladness;
Spirit of all comfort, fill our hearts. Refrain
- 2 In the pain and joy beholding how your grace is still unfolding,
give us all your vision, God of love. Refrain
- 3 Give us strength to love each other, ev'ry sister, ev'ry brother;
Spirit of all kindness, be our guide. Refrain
- 4 You who know each thought and feeling, teach us all your way of healing;
Spirit of compassion, fill each heart. Refrain.

The Meal

The Lord's Prayer

("Our Father," The London Fox Taizé Choir)

Benediction

A Celtic Blessing

(Margaret Rizza)

The guarding of the God of Life be on you, the guarding of loving Christ be on you,
the guarding of the Holy Spirit be on you, to aid and uphold you each day and night of your life.
The guarding of God in the guarding of Christ, the guarding of the Holy Spirit be upon you. Amen.