

Fruitful and Free

John 8:31-36 & 15:1-8

I planted a garden again this year. In April I tilled up my garden and put up a fence to keep out bunnies and deer. The first week of May I started planting. One of the things I planted was okra. I soaked the seeds overnight and then put them in the ground. Less than a week later the plants came up. By the middle of June my okra plants looked like this:



Okra leaves are necessary, but you don't eat okra leaves. So I kept watering and weeding and watching (see what I did there?). By the end of July these gorgeous flowers started blooming:



Flowers are beautiful and essential, but you don't grow okra for the flowers. So I kept watering and weeding and watching. Finally, the first week in August I began seeing this:



This is why we grow okra - for the fruit (those little torpedo-looking pods). This is what we fry up in onion ring batter.

Why am I telling you all of this? Because growing okra illustrates a couple of important things about the process of growth. First, growth takes time. A gardener or a farmer can't get impatient or give up; you have to stick with it because growth takes time. Second, growth is a partnership with God. I did my part (tilling, planting, watering, weeding), but God caused the growth in ways that are imperceptible to me.

Spiritual growth happens this way also. First, it takes time; we can't get impatient and give up if we want to bear spiritual fruit. We have to stick with it because growth takes time. Second, growth is a partnership with God. We do our part (we engage in spiritual practices such as prayer, fasting, and the Word), but God causes the growth, many times in imperceptible ways. In Philippians 2:12-13 Paul described this partnership:

12 . . . work out your own salvation with fear and trembling, 13 for it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.

We “work out our salvation,” but God is the one who is already at work in us. He gives us the desire and the power to do what pleases Him.

A week from tomorrow - on Monday, August 24th - we as a church are going to begin another 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. This 21 Days experience is a very intentional way to partner with God in this process of spiritual growth (which takes time). As an introduction to this 21 Days, I want us to consider a couple of passages in the gospel of John that describe the process of spiritual growth as a partnership with God. We'll notice that there are things Jesus expects us to do; and we'll notice that there are some things that only God can do.

After we look at these two passages, I'll talk a bit more about how we as a church are going to pursue spiritual growth through 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. [By the way there are 8 other churches in town that are beginning the fall with 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting.]

John 8 The first passage is John 8:31-36, the passage that Tim Cochran read earlier. Jesus makes a conditional promise in verse 31:

31 So Jesus said to the Jews who had believed him, “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples,

Notice the condition Jesus sets out: “**if** you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples.” To “abide” means to **remain** or **continue** in something. If you abide in Jesus' word, you remain in His teachings; you stay put in His teachings (and by extension, the rest of Scripture). Instead of hearing or reading the Word and then forgetting it, you stick with it. You think about it and put it into practice. Psalm 1 describes abiding as “meditating day and night”; in other words 24/7, around the clock, all the time.

Does this mean that if you **don't** abide in His word you **aren't** truly His disciple? The short answer is “yes,” because by definition a disciple is a learner or an apprentice. You can be an admirer of Jesus or a fan or a church-goer, but you cannot be a disciple if you don't abide in His word. You cannot learn from Jesus unless His teachings are your constant companion.

It's like learning a new language: you can dabble in it and learn a few words or phrases here and there, but you don't master a language unless you immerse yourself in it. This past week I was talking to an American friend who got a minor in Spanish at K-State; he said you don't really learn Spanish through high school or even college classes, but by studying and practicing it over a long period of time. You have to remain or abide in it. The same is true of our discipleship: If (and only if) we abide in Jesus' teachings are we truly His disciples.

One of the challenges of trying to abide in Jesus' teachings in 2020 in America is that we have so many voices vying for prominence in our minds and hearts: entertainment, news, podcasts, web sites, talk shows, sports, music, etc. If we aren't careful, we are abiding in everything BUT Scripture. As one author put it, we live in "a permanent state of distractedness" (The Shallows, p. 112). Consequently Jesus' teachings get crowded out or covered up. Our minds and souls don't have infinite capacity; we have to make choices about what we consume. Abiding in Jesus' teachings doesn't happen by accident.

Since abiding in Jesus' words is an essential aspect of discipleship, we need to be honest with ourselves about whether we are abiding in Jesus' word or in everything else. If this sounds too demanding and/or limiting, notice the promise Jesus makes in verse 32:

32 and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

Jesus promises freedom to those who are truly disciples, to those who remain in His teachings. Jesus promises that "you will **know** the truth." In Scripture, knowledge isn't merely knowing information; it's experiential. If you know the truth, you experience the reality it describes and you experience the power it promises.

Specifically, Jesus says, "you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free." Free from what? Free for what? Those who were listening to Jesus took exception to the idea that they even needed freedom. Look at verse 33.

33 They answered him, "We are offspring of Abraham and have never been enslaved to anyone. How is it that you say, 'You will become free'?"

They were thinking in the wrong categories. As Jews, descendants of Abraham, they didn't believe that they were enslaved to anyone (internally or spiritually) and therefore that they didn't need freedom. But we see in verse 34, Jesus was talking about enslavement **to sin** and therefore freedom **from sin**.

34 Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who practices sin is a slave to sin. 35 The slave does not remain in the house forever; the son remains forever. 36 So if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed.

Jesus explained that the type of freedom they needed was freedom from sinful habits; He said that everyone who "practices sin" is enslaved to that sin. Sin becomes

habituated in our minds and our bodies to the point where we can't simply "quit sinning." We need to be set free by Someone who has authority over sin and Satan. Jesus, the unique Son of God, alone has such authority because of His death and resurrection. The Son gives true freedom to His disciples (who, by definition, stay put in His teachings). Our part is to abide, but Jesus sets us free.

Jesus promises us freedom from sin when we abide in His word. If you've never experienced the power of the Word, you might think that this is make believe. But many people here at Faith and in the body of Christ all over town would tell you that they have experienced the liberating power of God's Word.

Can you identify an area(s) of ***your*** life in which you are enslaved and therefore need freedom?

- * Perhaps you are enslaved in unhealthy or destructive habits of thinking; your mind is dominated by critical, angry, judgmental, cynical, negative, or arrogant patterns of thinking. You need the mind of Christ so that you think like He does; after all, He had more freedom than anybody who ever walked on this planet.
- * Perhaps you are enslaved by alcohol, drugs, or some sexual sin; you've tried everything you know to do, but you can't find freedom.
- * Your bondage might involve a relationship that's holding you back spiritually; freedom might involve seeing God change the dynamics of that relationship or it might involve being freed up from the other person's influence in your life.

What is an area of your life in which you need freedom? 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting is an opportunity to abide in Jesus' words with a view toward Him setting you free in these areas.

John 15 Over in chapter 15 Jesus uses the imagery of the vine and the branch to describe how our fruitfulness is the byproduct of abiding in Him. Notice the promise in verse 5:

5 I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

If you see a branch lying on the ground by itself, you know it will never bear fruit. But the branch that remains on a healthy, life-giving vine/tree will bear fruit. Jesus promises that if we abide/remain in Him and if He abides in us, we will bear much fruit (because He is superior stock, the genuine vine).

Down in verses 7 and 8 Jesus adds what's implicit in verse 5, namely that abiding in Him also involves letting His words abide in us.

7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

We just wrapped up a series on the glory of God last week. Here in verse 8 Jesus says that when we bear fruit the Father is glorified; people see how glorious He is. As we saw back in chapter 8, Jesus says that when we bear much fruit, we prove to be His disciples; we prove that we're actually learning from Him and becoming like Him.

Jesus promises us fruitfulness when we abide in Him and let His words abide in us. This fruitfulness includes everything from the fruit of the Spirit (e.g., love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, etc.); and this fruitfulness involves spiritual fruit in the lives of others (e.g., leading people to Christ and helping them grow as disciples).

In what area(s) of your life do you need greater fruitfulness? It might be in the same area in which you need freedom. Freedom and fruitfulness go hand in hand. Or perhaps you need fruitfulness in the relationships with those closest to you; you sense that you're not helping them walk with Christ as God desires. Or perhaps you need fruitfulness in sharing Christ with others.

Since these promises of fruitfulness and freedom aren't for everybody but only for those who abide, ***how do we abide in Jesus and let His words abide in us?*** We use time-tested practices (or disciplines) that God's people have used for thousands of years. 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting provides the opportunity to establish or reestablish or deepen these disciplines in our lives. We have integrated three spiritual practices in our 21 Days experience which begins a week from tomorrow (on Monday, August 24th). We're not trying to impress anybody and we're not trying to prove anything with 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting. We're simply setting aside three weeks to establish habits of abiding and to seek God in a concentrated way.

The three core spiritual practices:

Scripture. We will be reading a chapter a day from the book of Proverbs.

Prayer. We'll pray for areas in which we need fruitful and free. We will send prayer points; we'll encourage you to do prayer walks in your neighborhood; we'll wrap up our 21 Days with a church-wide prayer gathering (we haven't decided whether it will be in person or online).

Fasting. When you sign up to participate in the 21 Days you'll see a write-up of several options for fasting. We want you to do something that is appropriate for YOU. You will also see a link to a sermon on fasting I preached in January. [You can find it [HERE](#).]

The next three weeks we'll preach sermons that we hope will give a valuable perspective on these habits of abiding. We'll talk about how we can engage these practices in faith, with a spirit of repentance, and in community.

The easiest way to sign up is through the Church Center app. Go to the "events" section and register. There you will find a description of the overall 21 Days of Prayer and

Fasting. If you register using the Connection Card, we will send you a link to the registration.

If you enter into this 21 Days with humility and a teachable heart, this could be a powerful experience for you no matter where you are in your walk with God. It could be powerful if you're already seeking Him fervently or if you're currently lukewarm in your faith. If you're not yet a believer, God could use this experience to bring you to faith in Jesus.

Here's the experience of one person who participated in 21 Days of Prayer and Fasting in January:

During these 21 days, God really revealed His faithfulness to me. He reminded me of His great love and that I am not alone. My circumstances throughout the 21 days were difficult as I experienced jury duty, trials at work, and friends facing challenging life events. But God brought me great comfort and peace in this time. I pressed deeper into His Word. My thoughts have been transformed more [through] this very focused time of pursuing Him. God really reminded me of His presence. It also helped me not to focus on myself but really focus on His character. I realized the time I spent on medias could be better used in prayer and be a lot more satisfying. It has helped me find a better balance in life.