

I got more sun than I should have. I was out wrestling with an invasion of multi-floral rose and burning bush, whacking and cutting and then dragging the downed brush curbside in time for the City of Belfast public works pick-up.

On one of my trips down to the road, I noticed that Barbara was trimming rose bushes, denuding them of what appeared to be very healthy green branches. When asked, Barbara said that the rose bushes needed to be pruned back so that they would produce an abundance of blossoms later in the year. What a perfect lead in to today's sermon, I thought!

I don't know about you but when I hear this gospel reading I can focus on those negative images. Much of what Jesus says feels like a threat. Do you know what I mean? Abide in me or else – I'll take you curbside! Be pruned, wither, and thrown into the fire!

But Jesus doesn't just say "*Abide in me.*" Instead, he says, "*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*" And that changes everything! The other statements about pruning and withering and the rest are not threats of intimidation but simply statements of fact—descriptions of what happens when we do not abide in Jesus, when we are separated from his love and acceptance, when we run or hide or think we can do it on our own or decide to stand alone or whatever. Branches don't fair well when separated from the vine.

Let's think a little more closely about this text (often referred to as part of the Farewell Discourse in John's Gospel). Jesus is speaking to his disciples in that upper room. He is preparing them for his departure and wants to assure them of his presence, even when life gets hard (and it's about to get very hard). The Biblical scholar, Raymond Brown, reminds us that the community for which John writes has likely been thrown out their places of worship, rejected by friends and family, and feels pretty alone. I think it would be safe to say that they are, quite literally, feeling like they have been cut down. John, through his retelling of Jesus' words of farewell, is offering a different frame of reference by which to reinterpret that particular community is experiencing. He declares that they have not been cut down, but pruned. John is making a promise: Jesus is with you, for you, abiding in you, and will not let you go. These are important words for people who feel cut down by circumstances.

And that group, of course, isn't limited to Jesus' disciples of the distant past but describes the feelings harbored by many of Jesus' disciples today...maybe even you. The single mom or dad struggling to make ends meet and provide a nurturing environment for the kids while struggling with a profound and entirely unexpected loneliness. The kid who's been cyber bullied for so long just for being different that he or she is beginning to believe what the haters are saying. The professional whose employment was terminated and, despite the headlines saying the economy is going full tilt, has no decent job prospects. The unexpectedly bereaved and devastated parent. The caretaker who is losing a beloved spouse day by day, little by little to Alzheimer's.

There are countless examples of persons who feel cut down – mowed down – by life's circumstances, and John offers us, also, a different frame. Jesus is with you, abiding in you, holding onto you, loving you, and will not let you go. Which means that what feels like a death cut is mere pruning. Growth is ahead; new life will come.

Jesus' words of comfort and presence are for you; he is with you and for you and will not let you go.

"*Abide in me.*" Alone, these words are, at best, good advice or encouragement and, at worst, a threat. But, "*Abide in me, as I abide in you....*" Ah, these words are pure promise, gracious words of presence and providence. Words that need to be shared, "*Abide in me, as I abide in you.*"