

## **Risky Business**

1 John 4: 7-21

John 15: 1-8

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### *1 John 4: 7-21*

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us. By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit.

And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. So we have known and believe the love that God has for us. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.

Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. We love because he first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

### *John 15: 1-8*

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 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. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

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This image of being pruned by God, of having our faults, weaknesses, errors and missteps cut away is refreshing, forgiving, healing and hopeful as new growth sprouts and blooms from what had been barren and unfruitful. It is encouraging that there are second, third and even four or more chances to grow and to bear fruit on our faith journey. Years of our own gardening and lawn care remind us over and over that it is by snipping away the dead, broken, blunted old growth that new life emerges.

Yet I confess that I have not always felt this way as the metaphor is complex and for a time I found it downright frightening. I admit to a spiritual cowardice and insecurity at that point of my journey, and so the image of being pruned, cut back, of being corrected and reshaped, of being thrown into the fire and burned seemed harsh and judgmental rather than loving and healing, especially in the way in which I understood the pruning shears of God. I would have told you then that when harsh life experiences, losses, natural disasters and painful life challenges happened, they were sent by God in order that we would be pruned, be cleansed and refined. This traditional, *yet inaccurate*, understanding gives us a God who does bad things – even if it is for an eventually good outcome. It was a slow process to shake this early life lesson and fully grasp the God that 1st John so poetically offers us. The God who is abiding love and who calls us ‘beloved,’ is the God who is with us at all times not as the giver of life’s grim and difficult times but as the One present, holding, comforting.

Knowing God as abiding love, and understanding that everything is in God and God is in everything, means that all events – good and bad, pleasurable and painful, life and death itself – have the ability to be part of our spiritual growth and faith development. As Paul said in his letter to the Romans, toward the end of his own life and often read at funerals; “For I am convinced that neither death nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.” So I am likewise convinced that no thing or event need separate us from the love of God when we remain abiding in God’s love and that all experiences can lead us deeper into the heart of God and lead to our flourishing.

Jesus is the true vine, God is the vine grower, and we are the branches. The vine needs the vine grower as much as the vine grower needs the vine, and the branches are utterly dependent on both for abundant growth. Vine branches will produce more fruit only if nurtured, cared for and pruned.

Now only a fool or a very disciplined and brave person would actually go seeking terrible experiences so that they could grow. Although one might consider that many of the rash and daring things we did in our youth, and that our children love to frighten us with, is a form of seeking experiences that will form us through joy and pain, through exhilaration and fear, through feats of daring and vulnerability. In ancient cultures there were often ritualized ways of engaging in experiences likely to test, to punish, and to build one up. Our society does not have many of these rituals left, although remnants remain. Some of the things maybe we did in youth groups such as those trust exercises when we allowed ourselves to fall backward off a wall into the arms of friends, or getting up and performing in front of others when timid, or joining a political or religious movement. But even if we didn’t seek out these experiences then life is sure to visit enough experiences upon us that we will have plenty of opportunity to be pruned and cleansed, humbled and wounded, reformed and recreated.

Those big and small losses and griefs in life – the loss of a friendship, a much sought after job, a physical capacity that has left us, the life of a loved one – can all initiate us even deeper into the love of God. Loss often reminds us of what we really value and thus re-orientates

us toward what really matters. Other losses teach us reliance on God when nothing else seems to be reliable or of help. Loss and suffering can open us up to great humility and compassion. As Paul, again in the letter to the Romans, expressed it: “suffering produces endurance, and endurance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint us, because God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit that has been given to us.” It is the presence of God that makes these wounding experiences life giving rather than destructive, pruning rather than decimating, and that helps us bear fruit of the spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.\*

Bearing these fruits is also risky business. They will inevitably reveal who you are, and on whom and what you depend. They will cause you to see and uproot so many old beliefs, old lessons, in a new, and perhaps even radiant light.

Jesus’ revelation of himself as the vine in whom those who abide in him bear much fruit, is good news shared with his disciples just days before his arrest and his crucifixion, and is reassurance that whatever is about to happen to him, and to them, they will continue to abide in his love, and that if they remain in his love then all things - including those pruning and painful experiences – will work toward ultimate good and bring them eventual joy.

This is good news not only for the disciples who heard his words, but for all of us who have followed. If we take on the risky business of bearing good fruit, if we remain rooted and grounded in the love of God, if we continue to abide in the Christ then all that happens to us will be part of our growth. Amen.

\* Rev Sue~ <https://www.companionsontheway.com/post/so-that-joy-may-be-complete>