

In John 15, Jesus gives us a very special invitation. One that is worth paying attention to. One that is worth sending in an rsvp. One that we would regret for the rest of our lives if we missed out. “Live in me,” he says. “Make your home in me.” The bible translation of the pew bible uses the phrase, “Abide in me,” and uses it some 22 times. “Abide in me” means to “remain in me,” “be connected to me,” “take root in me.”

As paramount as roots are to a tree or plant for nourishment and stability and life, so too is it paramount for us to be rooted in Christ for nourishment and stability and life.

Our lives are not short of invitations from sources seeking our attention and devotion, are they? Work, school, hobbies, sports, investments, family, friends? Every ad on social media or tv is an attempt to gain your allegiance to their product or service. We are approached by this organization and that organization to give your time and focus to them and/or give more money. Our heart strings are pulled on for all sorts of things. It is a wonder we have any suspension left at all. And if we think we can just do it all and support them all a little at a time we soon find ourselves spread so thin we may lose track of what is real and what is working and what is not. Then, with the turn of a dial, or another trip around the sun, or maybe just life in general, all of these things can disappear in a heartbeat, leaving you with nothing. All the time and resources and these things offered only what was temporary in return.

One of the most, if not the most, important gifts we have in life is to decide to that which we will be connected and be rooted. Why? Because what we are rooted in, what we live in, make our home in, abide in, remain in, connect to, is our source for life. This can often be measured by how we spend our time and resources and where we give our attention and devotion.

An example of this can be drawn out and considered in the amount of time and resources we give to activities and the influence those activities have on us. I did some research a few years ago into the priorities people had in life and how they were spending their time. Overwhelmingly, people professed God and family as their top two priorities. When asked why God was a top priority it was because of the positive influence and hope God and the church can provide for their life and the life of their loved ones (kids, youth, family) in decision making and being who they felt was right to be. When asked why family was a top priority it was because of the desire for belonging and support. Often, the two were seen in a close relationship with one another. What was fascinating then in the research was to learn about how their time and resources

were spent over the course of an average week. Based on the time and resources they spent at work or in school or participating in certain activities/ hobbies, and the attention they were giving to those things, they were self-discovering the expression of attitude and beliefs throughout their lives had become and were continuing to become reflections more of work, school, and activities. In many ways, these expressions were in contrast to what they desired and longed for from God and family. When asked if they felt they could or would do anything about it the answers were shockingly, "I don't know. This is just where we are in life right now and we don't really feel like we have choice."

I will be frank. The amount of time and resources we give to something has a significant influence on who we are and what we do. Youth and young adults have become so influenced by some video games; they have adapted their life to try to live out the video game. Unfortunately, video games are created as examples of mission. Many of these examples are that of stealing, violence, and war. What if the time and resources spent on video games became worship, youth group, mission, choir. What would the primary influence become. If we wish for our byproduct of life to be that of God and family, then we need to tap into those sources of life more than we are choosing or settling to tap into other sources. One hour a week at church in worship isn't going to hold a candle to the 40 hours a week we spend in a work environment or school environment. We spend more than an hour a week tending to yard work or cleaning the house. God is certainly good and all powerful, yet I think we can still help out a little, huh?

I get that this sounds as though I am saying work, school, and our other activities aren't worth any time at all and that could not be further from the truth. I do believe there are valuable lessons and things that come from each. We just don't need to pretend as though work, school, and our activities also don't provide several wrong turns and tendencies: winning at all costs or profit gain- both of which cause someone else to be less than... competition- which can lead to critical judgment and sometimes hatred of an opposition... have it your way approach- which suggests selfish catering and control.

Another example of this is the influence of politics on the church. In many ways, politics have become a major influence in our thoughts and actions, so much so that they are integrating and influencing the beliefs and understandings many people have of God and the church. Rather than God and the church influencing our politics, culture has flipped the script. How is that working out?

When you, individually, and we, collectively as church, give our time and resources to be rooted in, live in, make our home in, abide in, remain in, connect to God (Jesus) as our source of life, then our life and the life of the church will become a byproduct of all that is of God. We will have a life filled with the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Jesus is clear, "In the same way that a branch can't bear grapes by itself but only by being joined to the vine, you can't bear fruit unless you are joined with me."

Being rooted in Christ empowers us to reach in Christ. The whole reason a seed has roots is for the benefit of becoming more and providing more for its surroundings.

After Jesus highlights the importance of being rooted, he says, "I've told you these things for a purpose: that my joy might be your joy, and your joy wholly mature. This is my command: Love one another the way I loved you. This is the very best way to love. Put your life on the line for your friends.... I chose you, and put you in the world to bear fruit, fruit that won't spoil.... But remember the root command: Love one another."

What an incredible honor and privilege we have been gifted with. First, we are to note that God has chosen to abide in, live in, and be rooted in us, so that we would know of and feel the blessings of God all the time. God knows this is what we need to be whom God has created us to be. Second, we are to note that what this means is that God has chosen us to be witnesses and reveal the good news of God to the world. God has chosen us to be key instruments in God's eternal purpose and plan. Did you hear that? You have a lead role in God's kingdom.

A lead role to do what exactly? What is our mission? Our primary mission in being rooted and reaching, as Jesus commands, is to "Love one another." Each of us, as God's children, are to be reaching throughout our lives in love. Not just some of the time when it works for us. Not with just some people when it works for us. Not for us or even by us. All the time. With all we have. With everyone. For God and by God. "Love one another." It is just that easy and it is just that hard, isn't it?

For our mission then, let us keep this in our hearts and minds. God, who is steadfast and enduring and fulfilling, is the one who has called us and is the one who will provide for us all the power and strength and grace and Spirit needed to finish the race set before us. God's choice to live in us means God is with us always. And with God on our side, we can be assured of the nourishment, stability, and life we so long for.

Unfortunately, there is a disclaimer warning. I would be remiss in not mentioning it. I wouldn't want to be called out for false advertising. Being rooted in Christ also means that for no good reason at all, when we reach out in Christ, the world will attack and push back and try to stop God's light from shining. Whenever this happens, we must endure! We must push on in Spirit

and truth! We must not give in to temptations, no matter how difficult the task at hand! We must not be afraid! We must depend further on God as our source and not throw our allegiance and loyalty in other directions! We must abide in God's grace as the ultimate weapon against the world's hatred and indifference! We must live in the hope we have in God as the ultimate lifeline amid our circumstances and turmoil! We must make our home in God's peace as the ultimate blessing of wellbeing for all! We must lean into and on one another as a true community of Christ followers, for it is only together that we can become all of whom and what God has created us to be as the church. We must be rooted in our faith in God, Christ, and the Holy Spirit (three in one) as the ultimate source of nourishment, stability, and life instead of... well, anything or anyone else!

In 2020, a time when the world was being forced into isolation and separation, our call as God's church here at First Presbyterian, to be rooted and reaching, even against the toughest odds, gave us a mission to rally around. And rally we have. The time and resources devoted to God during this time have enriched the impact and influence of God's good news to God's children and will for many more years to come.

Rooted, we have not, are not, and will not be moved.

Reaching, we have, are, and will "love one another" in Spirit and truth, with God's help.