

Acts 8:26–40
Ps. 22:25–31
1 John 4:7–21
John 15:1–8

Abiding in the Vine

**Goal for
the Session**

Adults will explore the faith community's role as productive branches mutually abiding in Jesus, the vine.

■ PREPARING FOR THE SESSION

Focus on John 15:1–8

WHAT is important to know?

— From “Exegetical Perspective,” Sarah S. Henrich

All the language of this passage turns on the image of Jesus as the vine. He twice declares this of himself (vv. 1, 5), in each case developing the image in a different direction. Bearing fruit is a phrase also repeated in verses 2 (three times), 4, 5, and 8. How does Jesus as the vine connect with the disciples' bearing of much fruit? The relationship is one of mutual abiding. A third cluster of repeated terms has to do with abiding or remaining (*menein*): there are seven occurrences of this verb in these verses. It is the interconnection of these images that Jesus presses.

WHERE is God in these words?

— From “Theological Perspective,” Stephen A. Cooper

Jesus' parable, however, through its imagery suggests a living and growing community of faith, a site of productivity and increase. Based on its presence on the vine, each branch is to recognize its part in the whole and do its part. That part involves the production of fruits, or goods, which accrue not to the private good of the individual but to the good of the whole. Or, to extend the logic of the simile, these fruits accrue to the farmer: they are God's goods, with a view to which God planted and tended the vine. Thus the passage is ultimately about divine providence and the goodness of creation when it acknowledges its dependence on the Creator.

SO WHAT does this mean for our lives?

— From “Pastoral Perspective,” Nancy R. Blakely

As Jesus counsels and prays with his disciples, he invites them to stay close to him by placing their trust in him. He warns them that they cannot go it alone, trusting in their own strength. On their own they would be cut off from their life source. The temptation to go it on our own is great. We live in a society that promotes independence and making something of yourself. Though a valid goal, self-worth often becomes equated with our own success and what we can produce. It becomes very easy to think that it is all up to us and our own resources as we try to solve problems and meet challenges.

NOW WHAT is God's word calling us to do?

— From “Homiletical Perspective,” Barbara J. Essex

The community that Jesus calls forth is one that embodies an African proverb: *Because we are, I am*. The branches that do not yield fruit are the ones in the community who profess faith but do not engage in acts of love. This does not mean that one can *earn* salvation; rather, those who see and hear Jesus are moved to respond to the gift of salvation through their own acts of love. In other words, a sign of discipleship is doing good works for the right reasons.

FOCUS SCRIPTURE

John 15:1–8

YOU WILL NEED

- Christ candle
- grapevine wreath (optional)
- one small bare branch
- newsprint or board
- marker
- one copy each of three or four Bible translations
- Bibles
- copies of Resource Sheet 1
- copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 9, 2021

For Responding

- option 1: Resource Sheet 1, drawing paper, colored markers, YouTube video clip of Nelson Mandela interview and equipment for viewing (optional)
- option 2: Resource Sheet 2, pens
- option 3: newsprint sheets, tape, pencils, brown crayons or markers, purple construction paper squares or purple self-stick notes, scissors

Focus on Your Teaching

Though we profess to value community, the cultural siren song to be a rugged individualist is persuasive. In many places that profess to value teamwork, there is often a strong, underlying push to be competitive—in the workplace, in our children’s sports teams, in our strivings to see that our teenagers get accepted to the best colleges. All this striving to make it to the top on our own is in stark contrast to the church’s understanding of Christ, who is our head. For adults who are caught up in the endless struggle to be the best, a new understanding of being fruitful in community may be welcome.

Ever faithful God, guide my planning, that I may put my trust in you, not in my own abilities. Amen.

LEADING THE SESSION

GATHERING

Before the session, arrange a Christ candle inside a grapevine wreath (optional). For Responding option 2, tape together two or more sheets of newsprint. Sketch a curving vine across the center with a brown marker or crayon. Head the sheets, “I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches.” For option 3, consider downloading a video clip of Nelson Mandela explaining the philosophy of Ubuntu (www.youtube.com/watch?v=HED4h00xPPA)

Welcome participants with the greeting, “Christ is risen,” and encourage the response, “Christ is risen indeed.” Invite participants with experience in gardening to explain what pruning is. Discuss the following:

- ✂ If the branch is dead, how does it benefit the vine to cut it off?
- ✂ If the branch is living, why would the gardener prune it?

Explain that in today’s session, they will have an opportunity to explore the Christian life more deeply using the example of this gardening and farming practice.

Light the candle, identifying it as a reminder of the presence of the living Christ. Read 1 John 4:16b (“God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.”). Sit in silence for a few moments. Pray the following:

Thank you for the gift of your Spirit, O God, present here among us today and always. Guide us as we seek to know you more fully. Amen.

EXPLORING

Remind participants that the focus scripture for the last session was the image of Jesus, the Good Shepherd. Today’s focus scripture presents another agricultural image. Invite adults to identify the central image, as well as repeated words or phrases, as you read John 15:1–8 aloud from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible. After the reading, ask them to

With a passage so focused on a metaphor, it is helpful to use several translations of the Bible. Biblegateway.com is a growing way people use to access various translations online. This helps participants experience a more nuanced understanding of the passage.

name the repeated words and phrases. Print them on the board or newsprint, leaving some space below each word or phrase.

Form three or four small groups. Ask someone in each group to read the passage aloud from a different translation of the Bible with the group listening for repeated words or phrases. In the total group, invite members of small groups to name those words and phrases, and print them under the word or phrase from the NRSV that means the same thing.

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 (Focus on John 15:1–8). Have someone read aloud the “What?” excerpt. Ask participants to read over the words and phrases they identified in the various versions of the passage. Discuss:

- ✧ The writer of the excerpt notes that it is the interconnection of the images in the passage that Jesus presses. How are the images related?
- ✧ What does it mean to be mutually abiding?

Invite participants to read the “Where?” excerpt. Invite them to expand upon the notion of a living, growing community of faith. Revisit the discussion about the role of pruning. Discuss:

- ✧ In the life of the faith community, how are the branches related? What happens if a branch dies?
- ✧ If you consider pruning a living branch, how are the productive branches—i.e., members of the community—pruned, and by whom? How might this enhance the bearing of fruit in the life of the community?

As a transition to Responding, ask the group to silently read the “So What?” excerpt. In previous sessions, there has been conversation about how our culture promotes individualism. Ask participants to reflect on the danger for the individual Christian, and for the community in which he or she mutually abides with Christ, in attempting to go it alone. Discuss:

- ✧ What would happen to the individual branch if it cuts itself off from the vine?
- ✧ How does our congregation function as branches abiding in Jesus, the vine?

RESPONDING

Choose one or more of these activities depending on the length of your session.

1. **Explore a Proverb** By using an African proverb as a lens through which to view the concept of mutual abiding, adults will expand their understandings of the community’s role as productive branches. Ask someone to read the “Now What?” excerpt aloud. This proverb epitomizes the African philosophy of Ubuntu, the belief that a universal bond of sharing connects all of humankind. Show the YouTube clip if you have it. Discuss:
 - ✧ How could this proverb be said to embody the branches of the church that mutually abide in Christ?

Hand out drawing paper and colored markers. Invite adults to think of proverbs expressing mutual abiding and print them on paper, or they could illustrate them. Encourage adults to display them at home where they can reflect further on them.

If time allows, choose multiple Responding activities to allow participants to use several modes of intelligence. This enhances the potential for deeper engagement with the concepts in the session.

EASY
PREP

- 2. Questions for the Faith Community** By responding to questions about fruitfulness, adults can explore how they can be more productive for God's realm. Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 2 (Questions for Congregations). Ask participants to answer the questions. In the large group, discuss how fruitful participants believe their congregation is. Ask:
- ✿ If the harvest is bountiful, what pruning and cleansing needs to be ongoing in order to ensure that it continues to be so?
 - ✿ If it is less than bountiful, what steps might be taken, by both individuals and the community, to increase the harvest?

Pass on responses made about your congregation to your pastor or church leaders. Encourage adults to continue to reflect on and pray about the responses they made about themselves.

- 3. A Mural of the Vineyard** In making a visual representation of their congregation as branches on the vine, adults can gain clarity about abiding in Christ more fruitfully. Invite each participant in turn to draw a branch on the vine representing himself or herself, and label it with the person's name. Give each person two or more purple construction paper squares or self-stick notes. Adults can cut these in circles to resemble grapes, but it is not necessary. Ask them to think about what fruit they are bearing as a result of mutually abiding in Christ in the community of faith, print a word or phrase describing it, then attach it to their branch. Display the mural where others in the congregation can see it. Invite others to add a branch for themselves.

CLOSING

Invite the group to pray a litany of confession based on the ideas in the "So What?" excerpt. Teach them the common response, *God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.*

One: *Loving God, we confess that we have placed our trust in ourselves rather than in you.*

(response)

One: *We have trusted in our own strength when we should have leaned on you.*

(response)

One: *Believing we could go it alone, we have cut ourselves off from the true vine.*

(response)

One: *We have been tempted by our culture's call to independence.*

(response)

One: *We have equated our self-worth with our own success.*

(response)

One: *Open our eyes to your plan. Let us find our home in your Word and place our trust there. Amen.*

Distribute copies of Resource Sheet 1 for May 9, 2021, or e-mail it to participants during the week. Encourage participants to read the focus scripture and Resource Sheet 1 before the next session.

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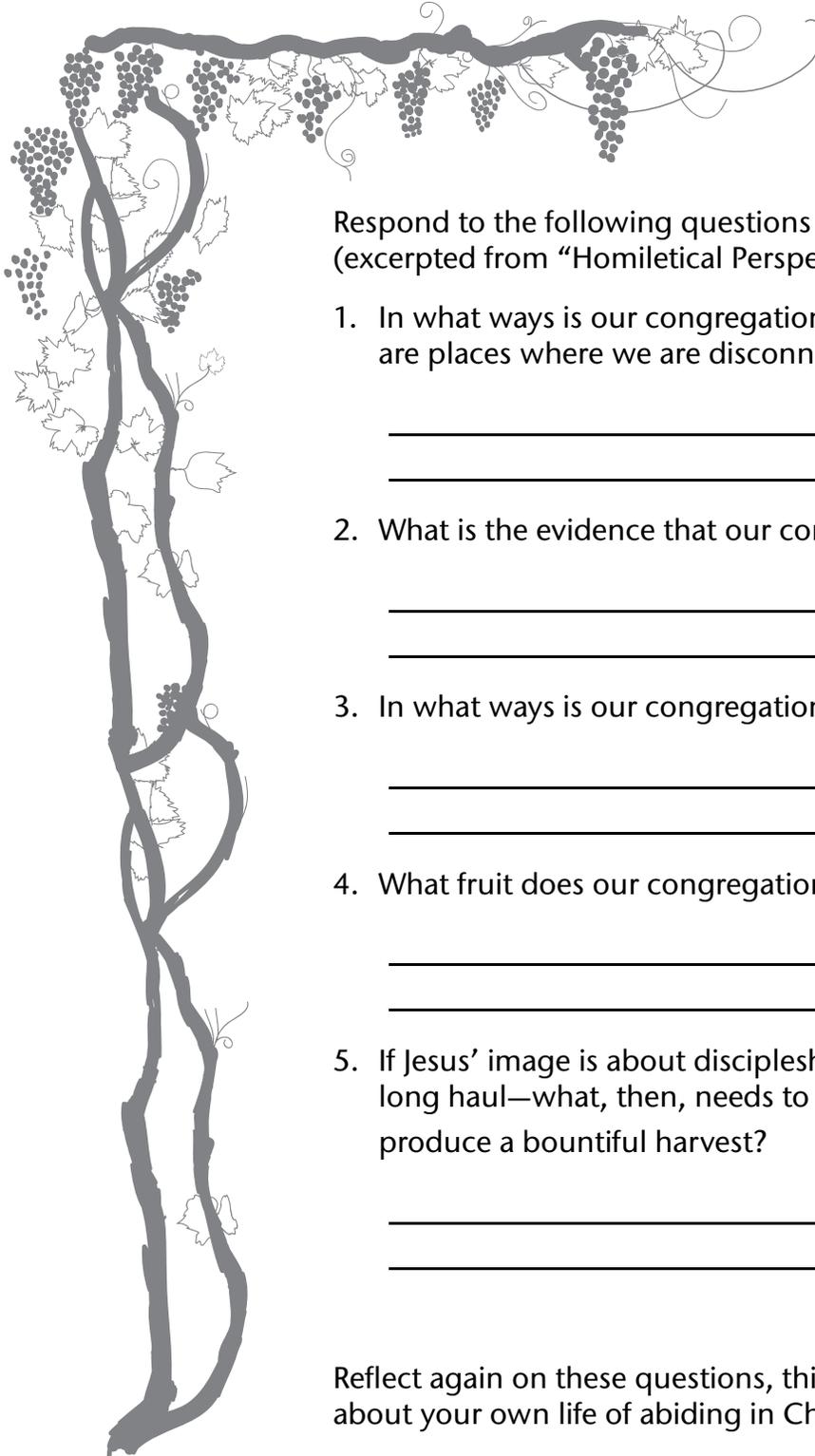
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Questions for Congregations



Respond to the following questions about your congregation (excerpted from “Homiletical Perspective” by Barbara J. Essex).

1. In what ways is our congregation connected to the vine? Where are places where we are disconnected?

2. What is the evidence that our congregation is fruitful?

3. In what ways is our congregation abiding in Christ?

4. What fruit does our congregation produce?

5. If Jesus’ image is about discipleship and community over the long haul—what, then, needs to happen for our congregation to produce a bountiful harvest?

Reflect again on these questions, this time posing them to yourself about your own life of abiding in Christ.