

Sermon by Bishop Janice Riggle Huie,

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Will you pray with me? Holy God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts together be acceptable to you, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

One of the fondest memories of my childhood is picking grapes with my grandmother, and my mother, and my sister Cherry. Every summer my mother and my grandmother—Mamaw, we called her—my maternal grandmother-- they made dozens and dozens of jars of grape jelly and many bottles of Methodist wine. Now my maternal grandmother was not a Methodist. Far from it—in ways which I will not elaborate. However, she did make Methodist wine—which is to say, she made grape juice and lots of it.

During the years of my childhood there was an abundance of grapes, mus tang grapes, in deep South Texas. Now let me tell you that deep South Texas is a semi-arid land with lots of what we call brush country. That means that it's land that's better habitation for cattle and goats than it is for people. Mustang grapes ripen in mid-July. In July in South Texas the sun is on fire at ten o'clock in the morning. The humidity is ninety per cent. And underneath those grape vines the air is as still as a newborn baby's breath when she is sound asleep. That's when it's time to pick grapes.

My sister Cherry and I were in elementary school. The last adjective any one would ever use to describe either one of us, or especially both of us together, would be the adjective still. On these great, great grape-picking expeditions, we never stopped moving. We flustered and fused like the mocking birds over our heads. We explored the black brush. We investigated currant bushes. We looked to see if there were any yucca plants sending up that waxy green staff that produced the sweet blossoms that the honey bees loved so much. With the regularity of a clock chiming my mother would call out to us, "You girls watch out for rattlesnakes, you girls watch out for ratle snakes." After the third time we just tuned her out, like so much white noise. Since you've been here in Cleveland, have you offered some one any advice—I mean really good advice (and what else would you give?), and somehow your words just seem to evaporate into thin air before it ever got to the other person's ear? If so, you'll know what my mother endured.

After walking a mile or two through the pastures, my mother and my grandmother would choose an area thick with grapevines and begin filling their buckets. Now, mustang grapevines are rare beauties. There are thousands of little branches and leaves all tangled together. They sprawl over oak trees and mesquite trees. They find themselves spreading over palm trees or fence posts or fence. They seem to go every which way, and no way at all. They actually are very messy—even chaotic. Their branches keep reaching up and

up and up out to the sun, and they make this great canopy that's a home for all kinds of creatures, squirrels and blackbirds, red birds and Mexican orioles. The central vines are these big woody stems, tough. They dangle to the earth and they are the ones that provide really good ground cover for the big animals, like deer and javelina, and wild turkey. The roots go deep deep into the earth tapping into water sands below creeks that of ten run dry.

Break off a branch from the vine? Thirty minutes of Texas sun, it is limp and lifeless, just more dead wood for the next big rain to wash on down the creek. Connected to the vine, the branches grow and they blossom and they scent the spring air with this sweet, delicate fragrance. And even in the driest of years they will produce plump, tart grapes.

I didn't know it then, 45 years ago, but the grape vines were teaching me, teaching me. As an adult, they've become to me a means of grace. They teach me about the body of Christ and how its many parts are one body. They teach me about connection and its marvelous blessing of fruitfulness. They also teach me about separation and its inevitable consequence of death. The grape vines have helped me to remember the incredible uniqueness of each of God's creatures, in all their differences, and how there's a place for them in God's creation. And in a manner quite mysterious, the grapevines continue to teach me something about God's delight and joy. They teach me to understand something about what Jesus was saying to his disciples long ago, and what Jesus is saying to his disciples today.

"I am the vine, you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you. Those who abide in me bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. Abide in my love. I've said these things to you," says Jesus, "so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." Do you see abiding in Christ? It's alive and whole and fruitful and joyful. Severed from Christ? Dead wood, fragmented, barren, dour. The invitation to abide, what does it mean?

Remember the grape vines. Remember the grape vines. They don't grasp after the vine. They don't earn the vine. They grow out of the vine. They receive the life that's flowing into them, they give life through the fruit that they produce. And Jesus says that fruit is love, love of God and love of neighbor. The disciples produce what they receive—the fruits of love. To say it again, what we do is an extension of who we are.

Dear friends, in ways that I don't remember experiencing previously, these weeks leading to General Conference 2000 seem to have been characterized by a climate of fear. Fear. And some pretty ugly talk. Seeds of suspicion and hos-

tility have been planted. Dis trust and even cynicism are even growing like weeds. They sap our energy, they drain our vitality.

Over and over again, worried United Methodists have asked me, “Bishop, will The United Methodist Church hold together? Can the connection be preserved? What will keep us united?” Does any of that sound familiar to you? Sometimes it feels to me like The United Methodist Church is just hanging on for dear life.

Friends, we can’t step out in mission while we’re hanging on for dear life. Clergy and laity can’t be partners with one another to transform the world on behalf of children and the poor while we’re focusing on ourselves. We don’t have the time or the energy. We don’t have the time or the energy to make disciples of Jesus Christ while we’re spending our time and energy second-guessing the motives of every one from the person in the pew next to us to the persons in the chairs in the legislative committees to the bishops of the church. And for those of us with white skin, we can’t eliminate racism while we’re hanging on to white privilege. While we are just hanging on, we are just surviving, and we’re not the people that God called us to be. We’ve done far too much of that in the past. We’ve tried to love God and love our neighbor and still hang on to fear.

In his first letter, John writes, “Perfect love casts out fear.” And in this gospel lesson, Jesus is very clear, “Love one another as I have loved you.” John Wesley echoes that in his sermon “On Schism.” He writes these words, “Schism is a failure of love.” Of love. So, will The United Methodist Church disconnect again? I live in the faith that love will triumph over fear.

God wants The United Methodist Church to be one body, one body. There are two realities that unite us, two realities: Jesus Christ and the mission of the Church. Jesus Christ. The vine. That’s who we are—it’s our being. Disciples. The branches. Producing fruit for the transformation of the world. That’s what we do—it’s our mission.

Now, did you notice in Jesus’ metaphor that branches don’t go around pruning other branches off the vine? It doesn’t happen in nature. It doesn’t happen in domestic production. Not ever. Branches that cut off other branches—it’s simply unimaginable. But this church, our beloved church, has cut off branches from the vine. Last night, we remembered and last night we repented.

What incredible arrogance for one part of the body of Christ to consider pruning another part of the body of Christ. Pray we don’t do it again for any reason. In fact, for one part of the body of Christ to hurt or diminish another part of the body of Christ—it is to wound Christ’s own self. You see, our very being is in Christ. Our connection is in Christ. In all our differences, in all our similarities, our calling is to be at home with one another. We let the vinegrower do the pruning. It’s really quite ordinary—and a little extraordinary, too.

The word that the Revised Standard Version uses to describe this relationship of the branches and the vine is the word remain. Remain. Some of you may know that word as the way you learned this text. “Remain in me as I remain in you.” Now, remember that grape vine. Remember the grapevine. Those branches have remained on the vine for a long, long time. They’ve survived drought and storms. They’ve endured cold northerners and fiery summer sun. Perseverance is a part of their being. Resiliency is their nature. Their roots run deep. So friends, take a deep breath and exhale. Relax. Be at peace. God loves the vine and all the branches. God loves The United Methodist Church and all its people. And who among us here and around the world does not long to remain in Christ and to be nourished by Christ’s love in the deepest parts of our soul?

I know it’s Friday morning, and I know many of you are tired already. And I know that General Conference is about the last place we usually think of remaining. We find ourselves scurrying to this meeting and that, and pushing paper here and pulling out notes there, finding our selves coming and meeting our selves going. Listening to United Methodists who interpret Scripture differently than we do. Rubbing shoulders with United Methodists whose actions offend us. Getting frustrated with United Methodists who want to change something that we want to change or that don’t want to change something that we want. It feels messy, even chaotic, like one of those big old mustang grapevines which seem to go every-which-a-way and no way at all. For some of us it’s pretty tempting to cut our selves off, prune our selves, stop listening, quit sharing, and to get really frustrated with others of us. It’s easy to become weary, not only in body, but also in spirit.

So if that fits you a bit, maybe you might, for a few minutes, just right now, accept this invitation from Jesus to remain. Remain. Remain in God and keep on listening to God and to your neighbor. Remain in Christ and keep on reaching out in love to your neighbor and the world. Remain in Christ and continue holy conferencing, not only in General Conference, but beyond. Ask God to show us a better way. A dear friend once said to me, “Just hang on to Jesus.” It was good counsel. It’s also true that if we loosen our grip just a bit and simply remain in Christ, we might discover that Jesus has been holding us up all along. And, in fact, if we actually let go, Christ’s love will carry us through.

The past tense of abide is the word abode. Abode. It’s a dwelling place. A home. A resting place. So Jesus’ invitation is for us, all of us, to make our home in him. To live every day as the branches live on the vine. Now let me ask you, how do you know where the branches stop and the vine begins? Where the vine ends and the branches start? Now it’s easy to identify the newest branches. The ones, they’re the most vulnerable, the most tender, the new branches. It’s easy to identify the core vine. It’s the place where the roots go deep, deep into the earth. But there are other parts of a grape vine, where the branch has been connected to the vine for so many years and that branch has produced more branches and those

branches have produced more branches. And it's hard to tell where the vine begins and the branch end. Do you have a sense of what I mean?

In February of 1998, I was the guest of Bishop Arthur Kulah at the Liberia Annual Conference. He invited me to preach, but mostly I learned. And do you know already that like several other African countries, Liberia has been devastated by war. The annual conference at which I spoke was the first full annual conference—all the districts present—in three or four years. Almost every United Methodist gathered there had lost a family member or a friend. They had all suffered greatly. The theme of the conference was forgiveness. Forgiveness.

Most of the sessions of the annual conference were neither legislative nor business. We might learn. I would describe much of the conference as (this is my language) conversation on how to live a life that becomes the gospel and making disciples. At one point there was this long discussion on forgiveness. What does it mean? How do you do it? How long does it take? Are there any qualifications on forgiveness? Various people spoke. Some people spoke at length.

Rev. John Russell stood up. (He's here by the way, a delegate.) He quietly reminded the conference of the death of his seven-teen-year-old son in the war. I learned later how Rev. Russell had been driving the car. How his son was in the front seat. How the soldiers had stopped them. How a soldier had pushed his rifle in the passenger window and shot Rev. Russell's son. How the child died in his father's arms. Rev. Russell was very brief when he spoke of the death. Then he spoke of forgiveness. How hard it is. How long it takes. What a painful struggle it is. How only by God's grace is forgiveness and new life possible. How forgiveness takes all our human desire and our behavior and our beliefs. And how in the end forgiveness is a gift of God alone.

I wept only when I got back to my room. And I asked myself, Had I witnessed a disciple, a branch abiding in the vine? Or had I seen the face of Christ himself, if only for a moment? Had I witnessed the vine?

Look around you, dear friends, look around us. When the world looks at us, General Conference 2000, what does the world see? Does the world see the face of fear or the face of Christ? Does the world see separation and disconnection and dead wood? Or does the world see this great vine with its wide canopy of branches with room for all God's people? In the activities of grace, does the world see barrenness or the fruit of love? When the world looks at us, does it see a people with set jaws and clenched fists and pointing fingers, or does

it see a people whose delight and joy in mission is an extension of who we are?

I hope the world will say, "Look at The United Methodist Church. Those people have opened their eyes and their arms to thousands of people in their communities and all around the world who are longing for their lives to be transformed in God's grace and be made perfect in love in this life. They can stop those folks a mile away and journey with them into a new way of life. Thank God for The United Methodist Church!"

I hope the world will say, "Look at the United Methodist Church. Those people have opened their ears to the cries of the children. And they are talking children into their arms and they are blessing them. In Africa, in Asia, in Europe, in the United States, children have food enough to eat, a decent home in which to live, health care that heals and makes whole, an education that prepares them for the future, and families and communities of faith that embrace them in the love of Jesus Christ. Thank God for The United Methodist Church."

When the world looks at us I hope it will say, "Look at The United Methodist Church. Those people have been immersed in a culture of racism and hate and violence and they have been cleansed—made whole. They are working to eliminate racism in their school boards and in their bank boards and in their own church boards. And they are standing as one body against hate and violence. Thank God for The United Methodist Church."

I hope the world will say, "Look at The United Methodist Church. We have inspected their fruit and it tastes good, very good."

No doubt, someone is going to ask, "When did all that get started?" And your reply will come, "Why it was that reuniting conference of 2000."

One thing more. When my sister and my mother and my grandmother got home from picking grapes, the real work began for the adults. The grapes had to be stemmed and washed. They had to be cooked until the juice poured out. All that juice was made into jelly and Methodist wine. At best, it was an all day process in an un-air conditioned kitchen with two children underfoot. The bread was made. The table was set. There was fresh grape jelly for the bread and the home made grape juice to greet, to eat, to drink. The family gathered round to eat, and they enjoyed and enjoyed and enjoyed until they couldn't hold another bite. Such sweet, sweet communion. The taste of goodness. The fragrance of love. The sounds of joy. Life abiding in the vine. Would n't you like The United Methodist Church to be like that? Amen.