

After a powerful windstorm, any of us who have trees in our yard, upon going out to assess the damage, know that we will find branches scattered about. This past year has been such a windstorm. And although the storm apparently is not over, we are able to see that great damage has been done. Branches once connected to the tree, are no longer. It is understandable that small branches will break off during a storm. But when large branches are broken off, we know that the wind was powerful indeed.

Last week I gathered with twenty-nine other pastors in Indiana. "Take Heart!" was the theme. And the presenters did a wonderful job of helping us in ministering to our congregations during the present crisis. Not one of us there was unaffected by the COVID storm. Not one of our congregations suffered little to no damage. And all of us gathered together were at a loss to explain why even large branches in our membership were broken off during the past year.

But there is good news for you and for me. Because we walk by faith and not by sight, the damage that we see with our eyes is not really damage at all. That which, to our eyes, appears to be massive destruction and a complete mess which is beyond repair, is actually a rebuilding process. Jesus, out of pure grace, is working to rebuild His church. His Father, and our Father, is doing the work of pruning the branches on the vine so that you and I will bear more fruit.

But how can a branch bear fruit when it is broken off and lying on the ground?

You are not broken off from Christ. You are not lying on the ground fit only for the burn pile. You are a branch in the vine. You are hearing the words of Jesus and you are taking His words to heart. And when "*My words abide in you,*" says Jesus, you are "*abiding in Me.*"

And when He says you, He means you all. Every "you" in the last two verses of our text is in the plural form in the Greek. So, we render these as you all, or as they say in the south, all you all. "*If all you all abide in Me, and My words abide in all you all, ask whatever you all wish, and it will be done for you all. By this My Father is glorified, that all you all bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples.*"

You are not the only branch on the tree. If you saw a tree in someone's yard having only one branch, you might not be so quick to even call it a tree. "It's a trunk with a branch sticking out of it," you might say.

And so what a strange looking tree, if we can call it that, Jesus' church appears to be now, and throughout the past year. Each branch separated from all the other branches. And not just six feet away. One branch hearing Jesus' words on a Sunday, watching the service in their home. Another branch miles away watching the same service in their home. A few branches gathered together somewhat. But all the branches in no way even resembling a tree.

Where is the "all you all" that Jesus speaks of? It is hidden to our eyes, but not to His. For a time, if necessary, the tree does not look like a tree. Jesus' church hardly resembled a tree when His disciples fled in Gethsemane. One branch fleeing this way to his home, another branch fleeing in the opposite direction to his home. "*Strike the Shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered.*"

But the Shepherd was raised to life. And He went in search of His sheep. He restored His branches to the vine. And He is doing this today. Jesus is taking each individual “you” and putting you together in a “you all.” Some are still missing. But Jesus knows who are His sheep. And He will, through His words abiding in them and in us, rebuild us into an “all you all” tree in His own time and in His own way.

*“I am the Vine,”* He says, *“you are the branches.”* When you look at a tree, do you say, “There is a trunk with branches?” No. You say, “There is a tree.” And so with Jesus’ church. He is the vine and you are the branches. You were grafted into Him in your baptism. You did not do this anymore than a branch can pick itself up and put itself into a tree trunk. It is Jesus who brought you, in your baptism, into Himself, so the life He is and has flows into you, and you bear fruit. And you, or I should say, you all together with Christ are the tree of the church. Not a branch and the trunk. But all you all together in Christ Jesus.

You look at a tree in your yard, and whether you are looking at the trunk or at a branch, you call it a tree. It is all one. And so, you all are one together with Christ and in Christ. So much so, that no one can tell where Jesus ends, and you begin. Where Jesus is, there are you. And where you are, there is Jesus. What He is, is yours. And what you have, is His.

And I mean your sinfulness. Your lack of fruits, and mine too. Jesus takes these and they become His. But what Jesus is, is for you. And He is mercy and grace, love and forgiveness. And this is for you.

Jesus knows a thing or two about trees. He hung on one and gave Himself up there for you. And I mean for you all, all you all. Everyone of you God forgives. He is not angry at you for any reason. Do not think that He is. He is a God of mercy. His heart is filled with it. And so, yes, He does forgive. He forgives you. When He looks at you, He sees not where Jesus ends, and you begin. He sees you as one with Christ, and in Christ, and Christ in you. For this is who you are, who all you all are. Amen.