

“Remain in Me”
John 15:1-8
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There was a time when my mother and I didn't get along very well. It is a stage well known to all of us called adolescence.

My mother battled insomnia for much of her life, and when I would get home from the night out with my friends she would typically be up in the living room with a book. Our conversations would begin innocently enough. But then almost imperceptibly they would devolve into a debate. That would be the polite way of saying it. The subject was typically theology or politics, well known hot buttons for most of us. Our voices never raised – we didn't do that in my Scandinavian family – but the intensity of the argument would, shall we say, heighten. We knew each other well enough so we could “get” to each other. There would be a verbal poke here and there, perhaps a veiled insult, finished off with a brilliantly sarcastic flourish. We were, each of us, masters at this kind of needling debate.

If my father happened to be present for one of these routine sessions, he would quietly get up and leave. He had no stomach for such disagreement, and wanted no part of it. Before long, you simply could not call what my mother and I were doing “debate.” Eventually, we were arguing. Well understood lines would be crossed, and someone would be hurt – either she or I (we traded who won and who got wounded. We would then finally quit the fight, only to be resumed another day.

I had thought that these sessions demonstrated just how independent I was from my mother. As I grew up it became apparent to me that such intense wrangling is evidence of our being too important to each other. The dynamics of both fusion and cut-off are stoked in the same furnace.

I recall vividly Dr. Ed Friedman, a systems theory mentor of mine, describing to us how he had gotten a letter from a woman who in several pages of single-spaced type detailing for him all the reasons she didn't like him. The letter dripped with vitriol, venom and sarcasm. When he finished reading the good parts to the small class, someone asked him how he responded to such a frontal attack. A broad smile flashed on Friedman's face and he suddenly bolted from the room and up the stairs to his office. In a moment he was bounding down the stairs again with a copy of his written reply.

“Dear Mrs. Jones [a fictional name, of course], I don't have any idea how I became so important to you. I'll try and not let it go to my head. (Signed), Ed Friedman.

The dynamics of both fusion and cut-off, in this case showing up as intense anger and attack, are stoked from the same furnace.

Now some fourteen years after her death, I am more than ever aware of how deeply connected I still am to my mother. When I catch a glimpse of myself walking in the reflection of a store window, I see my mother's walk. Several years ago Pastor Charles Berdahl and I did a game show skit for the congregation. For their amusement, I donned a wig that someone furnished me. I slipped into the restroom downstairs and plopped the wig on my head and looked in the mirror. What stared back at me was my mother, she having had a wig almost exactly like the one I had put on.

It isn't just the externals either. I realize now that it was those many trips to local branch libraries all over the city with my mother that gave me early a deep love of books and the written word. I have inherited my mother's almost instinctual skepticism of any pitch which came her way, she saving her best lines for the occasional salesperson who had her cornered. My mother had a deep love of ideas and could be very verbal about expressing them. She also could manifest profound self-doubt. All these in some measure I carry with me. In some measure, though she is gone, she abides in me.

The protagonist in John Cheever's brilliant short story, "Reunion," describes the last time he saw his father. He writes,

He was a stranger to me – my mother divorced him three years ago and I hadn't been with him since – but as soon as I saw him I felt he was my father, my flesh and blood, my future and my doom. I know that when I was grown up I would be something like him; I would have to plan my campaigns within his limitations.¹

We misread Jesus' metaphor about our relationship with him if we take from it a moral about what we are supposed to do, namely that we branches are to resolve to stay connected to Jesus, the vine. No, abiding is a far more passive matter.² The branch is grafted into the vine. Jesus is not the stalk. Jesus is the whole vine, and you and I are a part of it.³ It cannot on its own decide for another vine or no vine at all. It is a part of the vine and the vine is a part of it. This is not a moral. It is a stubborn fact of Christian existence. "Apart from me you can do nothing."⁴

And as for fruit-bearing, the vine has provided everything needed for the fruit to form and ripen. "You are clean already." Fruit is not willed by the branches. The fruit comes naturally out of the entire relationship in the vine.

¹ John Cheever, "Reunion," *The Stories of John Cheever* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1978), p. 518

² "[T]he disciples are already in union with Jesus, and the emphasis is on remaining in him." Raymond Brown, *The Gospel According to John, XIII-XXI* (New York: Doubleday, 1970), p. 666.

³ "Jesus is not the stalk but the whole vine, and the branches remain a part of the vine." Brown, p. 670.

⁴ Compare John 1:3, "Apart (*choris*) from him not one thing was made."

There was a time in my life when I didn't want to be like my mother. But the inevitability of life being what it is, I didn't have much chance of that. My mother ends up remaining with me no matter what I may will or want. I am grateful for the season of life arriving when I embrace and love my mother in me.

"Now, you have already been pruned by my words. Now go on growing in me and I will grow in you." Everything has been prepared. The branches will do what branches do as their part of the vine. They will bear fruit.

And so you will notice, of course, the fruit of the Christian life showing up when you least expect it. A look, a manner, a work, an attitude, a mercy extended to others – they will remind you of where you remain. "Remain in me," Jesus said, "and you will bear fruit."

And so you will. Amen.