



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## “Church as Garden”

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Rev. Erica Knisely  
May 31, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** John 15:1-13 (NRSVUE with inclusive language)

*(Jesus is speaking.) “I am the true vine and God is the vine grower. Who removes every branch in me that bears no fruit, but prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield. You have already been pruned by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.*

*I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Because apart from me, you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. God is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As God has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment. That you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this. To lay down one's life for one's friends.*

## Sermon

I want to begin this morning with a question to you. Why are you here? Not where are you here? On planet earth, why are you here? In church?

There are a lot of different reasons I think we come to church. We come looking for a sense of hope, encouragement, strength, especially when we feel like. The world has gone mad around us. We come to stay tied into what matters most to us, to our core values, the way that we want to live in this world.

We come for community. A lot of us, I think, emerged out of the isolation of the pandemic, really feeling a need to be connected to one another. We also come for meaning and purpose to serve alongside each other, whether it is in the food pantry, or Thursday night meals for unhoused neighbors, or a million different ways that we serve together.

Why are you here? And what kinds of expectations do you bring with you about what a church community should be?

Some of those expectations or assumptions sometimes are unnamed, living within us. And the more we get involved in church, the more we interact with one another, the more disillusioned we can become, about what church community is. The more our unnamed expectations or assumptions are transgressed, the more disappointed we feel sometimes. So I ask you to just hold onto those questions as we talk this morning about Church.

As I began to work on my sermon this week, I started with why am I in church? Which would seem like a very obvious question with a very obvious answer. I am a clergy person. Clergy people go to churches. *(laughter)* That's where we work.

But this has not always been obvious for me. I've been ordained for seven years now. I was in two different seminaries before that for years. And all throughout that time, while I developed a very strong and sure sense of my call to ministry, I carried a lot of ambivalence about Church.

I did not love Church and often I didn't like Church. I grew up in Church, right? I have these like wonderful sensory memories of angel wings at the Christmas pageant. And these felt figures that my mom used to tell stories in our Sunday school. And of the cadence of prayers that are set over and over again on Sundays, and the way that the hymns feel in your bones.

But especially as I grew older, and went to confirmation class as a youth, I began to find that there were a lot of holes in Church. The way that the Trinity or salvation was explained to me felt nonsensical. Then also now. *[laughter]* And I would read stories in the Bible, and I didn't feel like they were reflected in what I saw on Sunday. I really went to kind of a country club style church that reflected a lot of the wealth and status and privilege in the community.

I tried out different churches as a young adult, and they never felt quite like home. Like I had to curtail too much of myself or my doubts and questions to be able to participate in them. I became part of a multiracial church development, which I really believed in. But as I got more involved, I saw the misogyny in the pastor and in the church leadership, and I was hurt by that. I left church for several years.

So I felt a lot of disappointment over all of these years in churches. I felt disillusioned. But I still kept being drawn back into different church communities.

I also felt fine *without* church. I felt just fine. I mean, I still felt connected to God. I still had spiritual community in different ways with friends and family. I still was able to serve.

But ...Church. When Jim called several years ago as the church was coming back out of the pandemic and asked me to help out very part time with children's and youth programs. I said a provisional yes. Like I'll try it out. For a time. We'll see.

But after a year or so that yes became a full yes. And that yes was really populated with the faces of the people that I came to love. Especially the youngest faces. Not that I don't love you all. *[laughter]* So it's hard in some ways for me to articulate 'why church,' to really put it into words.

But the best I can say is that there is something about being embedded here that feels like being true to my nature. My nature as Erica in particular, my nature as a human being. My divine call to abide in an ecology of love.

So I think it's my job to think about what is Church about? Why are we here? But I don't think it's just my job. I think it's all of our jobs. To step back every once in a while and just think, what are we doing here? What are we trying to build? What are we trying to be, together?

So as I thought about this, the best metaphor I have for Church right now is to think of Church as a garden. A growing place. A place that cultivates life and ecosystem. A place that provides a home, that provides nourishment and beauty and fulfillment of purpose. A place that encompasses all of life.

The Bible is rich with imagery and gardens, horticulture. Gardens contain so much of Life. Birth happens in gardens. Death happens in gardens, missteps, betrayal. New life. All of it happens in gardens. All of that happens in a human life and in the life of a church.

So I wanted then to start with scripture as a place to think about this metaphor of a garden. I don't know if you can pull up the scripture for me.

**Scripture Reading:** John 15:1-13 (NRSVUE with inclusive language)  
*(Jesus is speaking.) "I am the true vine and God is the vine grower. Who removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. But prunes the fruitful ones to increase their yield. You have already been pruned by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine. Neither can you unless you abide in me.*  
*I am the vine. You are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit. Because apart from me you can do nothing. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire. And burned. If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish. And it will be done for you. God is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As God has loved me, so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Just as I have kept God's commandments and abide in God's love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment. That you love one another. As I have loved you. No one has greater love than this. To lay down one's life for one's friends.*

The scripture today is from the Gospel of John. And it's toward the end of John, it's what's called part of the farewell discourse, the kind of final teachings of Jesus.

And it's the last of these statements he's been making. I am, I am. I am the bread of life. I am the living water. I am the true vine. All of these statements are talking about sources of sustenance and nurture.

And there's a lot of talk of abiding. You probably heard that word about 15 times when Reagan read that earlier. Abide in me as I abide in you. Those who abide in me bear fruit. If you abide in me and my words abide in you as God has loved me, so I have loved you, abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love. Just as I keep God's commandments and abide in God's love. And this abiding is joy in me and joy in you.

And God is glorified by you bearing the fruit of this love. Love one another. This is my commandment to you.

So that can kind of sound a little bit like word salad, I think. But what all of this abiding, sort of like God in Jesus, Jesus and God, Jesus and us, us and Jesus, Jesus and God. It's like really pointing to something I think is true about the nature of our source, about love itself; it has movement, it's dynamic.

Love isn't something that's meant to be contained in a single human being. Love that is love is love that is shared. It's love that spills out, that flows, that can't be contained by a single person. It's the love that exists between, not just within, but between us. It's mutual love. It's love that makes a home.

Our source is what wants to grow in us. Love is what longs to grow in us.

And this vine; Jesus says, I am the true vine. As a Christian community, as a Presbyterian church, we're rooting ourselves in the life and teachings of Jesus, which are the way that love can be channeled through us. As we follow this way, as we follow these teachings.

All of us need to draw from the source of love to grow. And all of us are the way that love is given in the world.

And I love that if you think about the vine and the branches as one metaphor for Church, all of us are branches. Jim's a branch. I'm a branch. Babs, Carol, David, every single one of you is a branch. We aren't the vine. There's no hierarchy. We're all co-equals in this growth of love, which is our work. We might have different roles or different gifts that we share. We're all part of the same ecosystem.

And if this imagery about vining branches, this sort of abiding in love points to kind of the nature of love itself, of life itself, I think it also points to something true about our nature. That we're part of the ecosystem. We aren't self-constituted. We aren't even self-propelled. We could not exist without the conditions that create life and sustain life. We need nurture and care and love to sustain us.

Our American culture tries very hard to get us to think of ourselves as individuals. Self-made people. But the truth is we're connected. Our lives are mutually intertwined whether we recognize it or not. Whether we live into that reality or not.

There's something true about our nature that leads us to seek a home that acknowledges the truth of our connections. And our need for one another and our need to share love.

I could probably stop here. And stop talking about Church. But I don't want to. *(She stops, removes her jacket, and takes it to her seat, returns to her note stand.)*

Too much good stuff in garden imagery to stop there.

In its most life-giving form, a garden is a dwelling place, right? A source of food and nourishment and beauty. You have ground cover and leaf litter making home for insects. You've got small plants. You've got flowers that give nectar to bees. You've got vines that grow up into the trees for caterpillars to climb, to eat, to begin to make their transformation. You've got fruit trees that provide fruit and shade trees that make a home for birds and squirrels. It's a living breathing, beautiful, wild thing. And it gives life to so many different kinds of animals.

There's mutuality and balance in a garden like this that operates on all these different levels. The diversity in it is what makes it richer. Which is what makes all of it work as an ecosystem together.

Just like in Church. A lot of churches - and I don't think that we're exempt from this - are monocultures. Right? One thing.

There's so much more life when we've got different perspectives and different life experiences that help us grow and expand our capacity to love and to give love for the world. We need that richness to flourish.

We all carry expectations about community and expectations about Church. Like I said earlier, whether we recognize them or not. Different ideas about what makes a good church just like different notions of what makes a good garden.

The garden I envision is a wild growing fruitful place, a little unkempt, not perfect, but full of life.

Sometimes I pass by yards with beautiful gardens, and they look perfect. And the beds are mulched and there are no weeds, and nothing is out of place, and everything is green and growing, and there's nothing messy and I want that to be my garden.

Because my backyard does not look like that at all. It is a wild chaotic place. And sometimes I stand out on our back porch and all I can see is the imperfection. That plant doesn't belong there. Why are these weeds here? And everything I see is something I want to change.

But when I do that, when I look with those eyes, I miss everything else, which is all of the amazing color that's in my garden.

When we moved in, there was no life. There were no squirrels. Now they're everywhere. I like squirrels. *[laughter]*

Dietrich Bonhoeffer is known most for his book the *Cost of Discipleship*, which talks about resisting Nazism in Germany. But he also has a wonderful book called *Life Together*. And in it he talks about the dream wish that people have for church as a kind of utopian vision. He wrote

*Innumerable times a whole Christian community has broken down because it had sprung from a dream wish. God's grace speedily shatters such dreams. Just as surely as God desires to lead us to a knowledge of genuine Christian community, so surely must we be overwhelmed by a great disillusionment with others. With Christians in general. And if we are fortunate with ourselves. God is a God of truth. The one who loves their dream of a community more than the Christian community itself becomes a destroyer of the latter. Even though their personal intentions may be ever so honest and earnest and sacrificial, sometimes the perfect can become the enemy of the good.*

And while we might not be seeking perfection at St. Andrew's, that is not to say that we do not need to grow and to cultivate what we have, to tend to our community. The alternative is to leave everything to chance. And when we do that, things can quickly get out of balance.

For those who garden, you know a lot about invasive species. Species that are not native to our climate that grow and spread quickly, that can overtake native species, those that are adapted to the life that's here that give life. They can choke out the life of a garden.

That also extends to insects. In my garden, my nemesis is leaf-footed bugs. They are ugly. *[laughter]* And when you touch them, they buzz. And it's creepy. And they suck the life out of tomatoes and berries and all the things I want to eat.

And I have discovered it is impossible to get rid of them. Without a nuclear option. *[laughter]* Which would also destroy life around them.

But you can keep them in check. You can attract beneficial insects that like to eat their babies.

*[laughter]* Did I say that, oh, that's going to go viral! *[more laughter]* It's just the truth. It's nature. It's the cycle of life.

It's so with the Church. We have to tend to the things that would throw us out of balance. We have to attend to the things that would constrain our ability to love. And we have to do so with grace and gentleness.

Here's the fun part. I have a short list of things I believe that throw churches, our church communities out of balance. You might have some things you want to add to this list.

One of those things is that we forget that we are part of an ecosystem. That we are here for nourishment, yes. For hope, yes. But we're here to participate in mutual love. Mutual love requires that we remain open to one another. To listen to one another, to grow. When we walk through these doors, we don't drop all of our bad habits. And all of the isms that have been embedded into us like thorns in our culture: sexism, heterosexism, racism, consumerism, all the isms.

They don't just fall away when we walk through the doors. We have to work to remove them. And one of the ways we do that is by listening to one another and making room for the stories. Of different experiences and different identities.

We also come with our own wounds. We come to seek healing to draw support from this community, to grow. But we also have to take responsibility for our own healing.

Many of the coping strategies that we've learned, that have helped us get through really difficult and traumatic things in our lives no longer serve us here. They no longer serve the cause of mutual love. We can't allow our wounds to wound others. We have to seek our own healing.

Another thing that is really common in communities, and all of us, I'm sure at some point, have participated in this, is triangulation. It usually starts by two people coming together to try to make sense of the actions, the language, the behavior of a third person. But it can progress into those two people becoming fortified against the third.

It can kind of take on a life of its own, and where you just see that third person in a very concrete and a very rigid way where there is no room for growth or love or change, and the more that grows in a community, the more the bonds of mutual love are shattered.

And I don't say this as judgment, but really as a call for each one of us to dig down deeper into our source to find a different way to get along.

Finally, we have to remember that yes, we're here to receive nourishment and hope and encouragement and support. But our purpose is so much larger than that. We're here to bear fruit, to become sweet nectar for the world. The nature of God's love is love that spills out, love that pours over, love that needs to be shared. That's our source and our purpose.

Parker Palmer, writing about church community said,

*If the church would search its faith and history, it would relearn those truths about community which we most need to hear. We would remember that God calls us to live in community, not for ourselves, but for others. We would recall that there are true communities and false ones. We would learn again that true community leads inevitably to politics, to confronting the powers arrayed against the human interest, and I would say all of life. Our history will remind us that community is no flourishing utopian garden, but a place of promise and discipline and cultivation.*

This is my understanding of Church. Church as a garden, church in all its imperfection, a wild place, a place that gives life. I see St. Andrew's as a place full of promise. A growing place, a

place for the birth and growing of mutual love. I'm here because it is my nature to be embedded in an ecology of love. One that is awake to the truth of our being.

Why are you here? How do you understand our church?

I hope we will continue to be a dwelling place of love, a place where many can call home. A place where we can grow together and give life to one another. A place where we remember that we need each other to thrive.

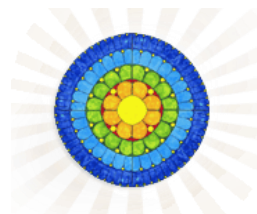
I invite you now to your own reflections on these words.

## Benediction

Rev. Babs Miller

Erica called us to be that sweet nectar of life that's called Love. And so I would remind everyone of you again., that each of you is a child of that wonderful spirit of love that we sometimes call God. And that spirit knows when you skin your knee, or your heart. That spirit knows when you admire a butterfly or cry in the darkness. So go out into this wonderful creation and tell the whole world that they are loved just exactly as they are. Go and kiss the hurts of this world. Go and laugh and play in the fields of grace and love. Go in peace. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



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