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Call and Response (John 15:1-11)

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My name is Susie Begbie.

I am a GP.

Emily and I, with our older brother Tim, grew up on a farm not far out of Canberra, where our parents still live.

We have a large extended family, many of whom live locally, who are a big part of our everyday lives.

My Christian journey has been shaped, to a significant extent, by our parents' choice (before I was born) to leave the Anglican Church, and the parish of St Matthias in Paddington where our father was rector, to set up a community just south of Canberra – Caloola Farm.

And we were schooled in the emerging tradition of 'home church'.

The rules and rituals of religious institutions were therefore largely unknown to us, although in adulthood the Anglican roots of our culture and learning have become easily recognisable.

In place of these we were given an experience of freedom of faith-exploration that I now see is an unusual gift. There were no wrong questions, nor any apparent desire to ensure we learned the right answers. Crises of faith and problems of living out a Christian faith in the world were freely discussed, and not a reason to reject Christ or the pursuit of truth and meaning within the Christian tradition.

Like Heather, I do not recall a time in my life when God did not exist. And Jesus, God's son, has always been there too. My relationship with Jesus as Christ, however, has been a much rockier road.

This verse from John's gospel marks a particular moment on that road; I suppose it could be looked on as a 'calling'.

I was preparing a talk for a church service, and our study of John's gospel had reached chapter 15.

My own life was at something of a crossroads – I had just finished 3 years of working in a clinic which provided a service to a marginalised community – with all the disease of poverty and dispossession that ensue.

I had been working under the supervision of an inspiring doctor – a man who had worked for 20 years in a social demographic where the average burn out time for health workers is 18 months. A faithful, dogged, loyal man, with plenty of difficulties of his own - a man who also happened to be an atheist. A staunch atheist. A true believer in non-belief.

Whereas I, a true(ish) believer in God and Jesus, had lasted 3 years in the job and limped away – distressed and depressed by my experience of that work and the intractability of the health problems of those who carry such a heavy social burden.

And then I read this passage: John 15:1-6

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.

You have already been cleansed 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.'

I was furious. I have been angry with God and His word regularly and often – even so, this time stands out as a cut above the rest.

How dare he?

How dare this man cut off non-believers just like that and burn them as withered branches?

How dare Jesus say that unless we dwell in him we cannot bear fruit?

Where did this leave my atheist boss and his 20 years of work?

Where did this leave me? Because the fruit around my feet seemed to be lying pretty thin on the ground.

It was so absurd, so at odds with my own experience, and yet, it was so intractably there.

I knew, by this stage of my Christian journey, that following God and Jesus led to the truth. So I didn't really have the option of rejecting the passage outright, of ignoring it and moving on. Also I had a talk to prepare for church that Sunday.

I don't recall now, how I dealt with these problems in the talk at church. I am quite certain I did not come to any satisfactory personal understanding of, or even truce with, this passage at the time.

But then it became my daily prayer. I don't know how this happens, but sometimes it does, and you sort of have to take notice when the words insist on being there, every day, just waiting for you to say them.

'Abide in me, and I in you.'

'Live in me, and I in you.'

It made no particular sense. It explained nothing. It gave me no answers. And it stayed.

'Live in me, and I in you, so that you may bear fruit.'

Over time – a lot of time – praying this every day, I stopped requiring a particular outcome, a specific answer to my chosen problem.

'Live in me, and I in you, because apart from me, you can do nothing'.

This was a bit harder to take. The withered branches, I might say, still didn't make it into the daily prayer. And when I did stop to focus on the withered branches and their fate, Jesus gave me the same answer he gave to his disciple Peter, when Peter asked how a fellow disciple's life would end.

'Lord, what about him?' Peter asked. And Jesus replied 'what is that to you? Follow me.'

'What is that to you? Follow me.'

And so I did. In a fashion. In a stumbling, resistant, armed-to-the-hilt, defensive sort of way.

And over a bit more time, there was more shifting. An understanding crept in, made it past my vigilant defence, that when Jesus says 'live in me, and I in you', he is not inventing a rule, but offering an invitation.

That when he says *'apart from me, you can do nothing'*, he is not giving me an instruction on how best to judge my fellow humans, to work out where they fit into the picture, he is simply speaking to me. He is explaining something about my existence, my nature, my limitations.

He is telling me what happens when one person tries to exist as a sole entity, as a stand-alone individual, as the single person who can and should be able to effect change in any given situation. He is explaining it can't be done. It isn't possible.

I cannot, of my own will, volition and strength, fix up this broken world. Not even a small broken community within it. Not even one other broken person. And clearly not myself.

We cannot live alone, separate from the source of all life, separate from each other. It just isn't possible.

'Live in me, and I in you...I am the vine, and you are the branches...those who live in me bear much fruit...apart from me, you can do nothing.'

For some of you, this will have been self-evident from the beginning, a lesson that is so obvious it barely needed to be learned. For me, it has been a revelation. A very gradual and gentle and still unfolding revelation of who Jesus Christ is, of what this invitation is. It is an invitation to live in love.

'As the Father has loved me,' he says, '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 my Father's commandments and abide in his love.'

'I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete'.

Amen.