

I AM (Week 6) - I Am the Vine

Yesterday's Sermon Summary

1. Our last "I am" statement made by Jesus in John's gospel is the 2nd that occurs on what we call "Maundy Thursday." In [John 15.1-11](#), He calls Himself "the true vine." This is not a random metaphor - it is yet again one from common life in ancient Palestine, but, if modern Passover liturgy is any indication, vines, grapes, and wine were just blessed four times during the Passover Jesus just observed with His followers.



2. Verse 11 is crucial in how we understand Jesus' intent or hoped outcome for what He's saying: "I have said these things to you (the disciples) so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." So this is a text about joy - how to make Jesus happy, how to share in Jesus' joy, and how to have our joy filled to the brim. Thus, it cannot be read as an "Abide or else!" threat.

3. How we bring Jesus joy as His followers and how we experience joy for ourselves as described in John 15.1-11 can be summarized in one statement of fact and two actions. First, the statement - we need to remember that we are branches, not the vine and not the vineyard owner, nor even the fruit we produce. If you like, we are conduits, not the source nor the results; we are the extension cord, not the light that shines nor the wall outlet nor the power station that creates the electricity. Our single goal is let the life, vitality, love, and character of God flow through us.

4. And, remember, this is about joy. The longer you reflect on our identity as branches or extension cords, no more or less, the freer we should feel. We are not merely reliant on our own meager resources in any given situation but can be plugged into God's vast resources. Likewise, we are not responsible for the end results of what we try or attempt or seek to do/say on behalf of Christ. Fruit will come if we just focus on being branches or conduits, we can trust in that.

5. Here's the first and primary action that Jesus says will bring Him and us joy: "abide" (a word He uses in some form 11 times in these 11 verses). To "abide" is to remain, stay, dwell, or make a home with. Richard Foster likens it to soaking: we are to stay with Christ long enough to be permeated by Him. Foster goes on to note that there is nothing more fundamental, more central, nor more pivotal to our spiritual lives than "abiding."

6. In John 15.1-11, Jesus mentions that we are to abide/remain/dwell in two things: a) His word and commandments (vs. 3, 10), and b) His love (vs. 9). How can you - and each of us - work at remaining in both? How can we linger in the words and teaching of Jesus, enough so that it permeates us and changes us from the inside out? How can you do that daily, weekly, etc.? And how can you stay rooted in Christ who always approaches you from a posture of love and care? How can you remind yourself regularly of that foundational orientation?

7. Lindsey Armstrong, a PCUSA minister in Atlanta, GA, says that "abide" is a timely ancient word/concept that can save us today for our obsession with action and busyness: "Jesus' final words are not a to-do list.

Instead, He says 'Abide. Stay. Remain. Dwell. Endure. Be present'...Christ calls us to reject the notion that constant activity gives us significance. He invites us to recognize that our salvation and position in Christ are cultivated and nurtured by God the vineyard keeper, not the result of our own work."

8. The second action mentioned in John 15.1-11 that brings Christ joy and invites us to share in that joy is one that is done to us, not one that we do. We simply need to cooperate with it and not resist it. And that action is "pruning," which can also be translated "cleansing." And it's crucial to see that pruning is NOT punishment nor is it discipline for unproductive branches. It happens to good branches, not the worst ones.

9. Pruning by definition is a loss or lessening (you can see in your mind's eye leaves and tendrils being trimmed off a branch, right?); in the words of Father Richard Rohr it is "a letting go of what doesn't matter anyway." It's subtraction that turns out to be addition. God may be removing what's unnecessary so we can focus on what really matters or what God really wants us to be doing, or perhaps God may take away several options so that the one you need to follow becomes clearer. And, remember, this kind of subtraction brings about joy - both for Christ and us.

10. Here's a good summary quote about Jesus the true vine, from a book on the 'I am' statements in John by a Methodist pastor named Robert Fuquay: "When we focus on the vine, we wave the white flag of surrender. We admit we can't produce everything we would like. We admit that we need help. Sometimes that help comes in the form of God's pruning when God cuts away what's getting in the way of our fruitfulness. At all times, we need to remember that God is responsible for producing the fruit. Not us. Our job is to be a branch. That's all."

A Note about Interpreting John 14.6 and John 15.1-11

Because a Sunday sermon needs to be limited in scope and time, we didn't cover in any depth the problematic and fairly recent (historically speaking) misinterpretations of the last two "I am" passages in John's gospel: "I am the way, the truth, and life; no one comes to the Father but by Me" (14.6) and verses like this one in John 15, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned" (vs. 6).

Too often, these have been construed as statements declaring the utter falsehood of other religions and/or the hellfire and brimstone final destiny of all who don't believe in Christ specifically.

Here's how that approach is pretty clearly a misrepresentation of these texts:

1. First and foundationally, both passages are Jesus addressing His disciples (that is, those who already have a relationship with Him); Jesus is NOT making sweeping generalizations about other faiths or nonbelievers. So whatever these phrases mean, they have to be applicable to disciples. And, more specifically, Jesus is speaking to His followers on the night before His death; that loss hangs in the air and colors His every word to them...He's getting them ready for His humiliation and murder, and their despair and grief to follow.

2. John's gospel was written during an era of intense persecution for Christians (be it early, in the late 60s or 70s CE, or later, 90-100 CE). Thus, the way Jesus is presented and how His teachings are conveyed are meant to address believers under tremendous duress.

3. So in regard to the second phrase in Jn. 14.6 (the one underlined above) it's much more likely that Jesus meant something like this - "In a few short hours from now, you're going to question everything that I ever taught or promised you. But, rest assured, what You've seen and heard in Me is the way to God, and always will be. My death doesn't invalidate My message; you need not search elsewhere." [Jn. 14.8-11](#) that follow are quite similar - the disciples need not keep looking for God the Father because the Father is seen clearly in the Son, yes, even when that Son is about to be arrested, convicted unjustly, and executed. You can see how this message would also have been heartening for John's readers who were experiencing the same doubts.

4. As to the image of withered and burnt branches in John 15, we as 21st-century American Christians tend to have 'Hell on the brain'...and almost every time we read "Hell" into a biblical text, we're, well, wrong. Here in John 15, there are strong echoes of a passage like [Isaiah 5](#) about Israel the vineyard - and despite its coming destruction, Isaiah promises that Israel will be restored. And fire in the Old Testament is not about permanent destruction but about purification or refinement for God's own people, however painful it might be (see, for example, [Zech 13.9](#)). Also, John 15.1-11 is a parable, an allegory or extended metaphor meant to convey deep and spiritual truths; it's not meant to be taken literally nor pushed to extremes. So, to put all that together, the cut off and burned branches in 15.6 are a) disciples, not nonbelievers, who b) feel the cost or consequences of not abiding in Christ, which is to experience a kind of existential deadness, and, as such, c) are being refined or purified by God because God seeks to do that for anyone - disciple or not - who has chosen to live independently from God and withers away as a result. Or, at least, that's closer to Jesus' intent than some brusque warning about Hell - remember, this is supposed to bring the hearers joy...

Abide this Week

Because it contains such a crucial image of our role and place as Christians, hang out in John 15.1-11 a few times. Let its words dwell in you. Pray the words. Journal about them. You can use several different translations, if you like:

- [John 15.1-11 NRSVUE](#)
- [John 15.1-11 MSG](#)
- [John 15.1-11 EASY](#)

Make it tangible: how will "abide" in Christ's word and love this week?

Reflect backward: When have you experienced times of "pruning" in your life?; How do you know it was "pruning?" And what was the result?

A few of short devotionals on "abiding" and "joy" in John 15.1-11 for your use this week:

- [Now, to Abide](#)
- [Abide](#)
- [And from this Corner . . .](#)
- [For Joy](#)