

"I Am the True Vine"

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

March 29, 2009

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Isaiah 5:1-4 (NRSV)

Let me sing for my beloved
my love-song concerning his vineyard:
My beloved had a vineyard
on a very fertile hill.
²He dug it and cleared it of stones,
and planted it with choice vines;
he built a watchtower in the midst of it,
and hewed out a wine vat in it;
he expected it to yield grapes,
but it yielded wild grapes.
³And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem
and people of Judah,
judge between me
and my vineyard.
⁴What more was there to do for my vineyard
that I have not done in it?
When I expected it to yield grapes,
why did it yield wild grapes?

John 15:1-12 (NRSV)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹²This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you.

In the "I am" statements, Jesus has taken us into the very heart of his identity. But with today's provocative statement, Jesus reveals that the God who has come down to us desires a loving relationship so close and intimate that his way becomes our way.

To this point, we've looked at Jesus' "I am . . ." statements in the order in which they appear in John's gospel. However, with Palm Sunday and Easter just ahead, I've reordered the final statements. Today's, "I am the true vine," is actually the final such statement in the gospel. Jesus' extended metaphor here is a part of his lengthy, final discourse with his disciples on the eve of his crucifixion.

The vineyard

Jesus' hour has finally arrived and he tries to help his disciples understand what is about to happen. With the seemingly simple statement, "I am the true vine . . .," Jesus draws upon the much-used metaphor of the vineyard.

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn't be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-4, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan, There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard turned bad (as in today's passage from Isaiah) and God will come to judge

Abiding Still

In today's passage from John, we find more talk about our abiding in Jesus and Jesus' words abiding in us. This is often difficult to understand. What does it really mean to "abide" in Jesus, to "remain" in him, to "dwell" in him, or to "continue" in him, all of which are valid ways to translate the Greek?

In his study guide on John's Gospel, Mark Matson¹ helps us to get a little better handle on this by taking us through a few key verses from John 15.

1. "Bear much fruit and become my disciples" (15:8). Playing off the initial metaphor of the vine and the branches, Jesus defines discipleship in terms of its results. To be a disciple is a matter not just of believing in some sterile way but of demonstrating that belief in tangible, productive ways. By linking discipleship to tangible results, Jesus sounds a theme similar to that found in chapter 8, where he directs the believers to abide in his word.

2. "Abide in my love" (15:9). Fundamentally, abiding in Jesus means to remain tied to the very nature of Jesus, who loved the world and loved his disciples. Thus, being a disciple means to remain rooted in the very nature of Jesus' mission to love the world and so bring light into darkness.

1. from Mark Matson's *Interpretation Bible Study on the Gospel of John*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 95-96.

(continued in the p. 3 textbox)

and destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there are images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

In this last meal and talk with his disciples, Jesus takes the vineyard imagery around himself. He is the true vine. He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. He is the Israel that is able to keep its covenant with God to simply love God and love neighbor. He is the Israel through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, thereby fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham long before (Genesis 12:3).

You'll remember that the other "I am" statements we've looked at so far can be seen as not-so-subtle hints to Jesus' divinity or, at least, his identity with the Father. Based on that, we'd expect to find Jesus as the vinegrower in this passage – for it is God who is the vinegrower in the OT passages. However, Jesus makes himself the vine in the metaphor; the grower is the Father. This "I am" statement identifies Jesus with Israel, the people of God. He is a Jew. He is human. He is one of us. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, the true Israel, exists in enduring relationship with both the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine's branches.

It's helpful to step back from Jesus' words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch.

It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Because grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.¹

¹John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking!

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life to us. After all, he is the Bread of Life! So the question is always, will we remain in the vine or will we go our own way? Will we seek the independence and self-sufficiency that the world values and offers? Or will we remain connected to the vine, remain in Christ, entangled with and dependent upon not only Jesus, but the rest of the

Abiding Still

(continued from the p. 3 textbox)

3. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (15:10). But abiding in Jesus' love is not a matter of belief for emotion; it is ultimately proven by action. So keeping his commandments is the basis for proving that one abides in that love. Earlier, in 14:15, Jesus affirmed the connection between keeping his commandments and loving him. Indeed, Jesus said that following God's commandments is how he demonstrates his own love for God: "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (14:31). In chapter 15 Jesus returns to the connection between keeping commandments and love. The two are inextricably linked -- one cannot truly love God without following God's wishes. In the same way, one cannot truly say he or she abides in Jesus' love without following his wishes, which are the same as God's.

4. "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (15:12). This commandment to love one another was first explicitly introduced in the final scenes of the supper (13:34). It was repeated at 14:21. In this context, Jesus links the commandment to love one another with the desire to remain in his love. In other words, one cannot love Jesus without manifesting the same love toward others. Here is the core of Jesus' self revelation: self-giving love.

As you can see, the key is to grasp the intimacy of relationship that Jesus desires for us and with us. If we keep the metaphor of the vine and its branches in our mind's eye, we'll perhaps begin to sense the astounding and very personal love that God has for us all and the love that God asks of us all.

branches, the entire community of believers?

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship.² This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*.

Producing fruit

Finally, we the branches are to bear fruit. We are to allow God to prune us and shape us so that we have the strength and vitality to love and to love well.

We can bear fruit, but only by remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us.

But we shouldn't think that Jesus' way is some sort of gray, joyless obedience. Instead, Jesus assures us that he has said all this so that our "joy may be complete" (15:10). Joy, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT." As Don Carson writes, the love of God is the love for which we were created. When we live within that love, rather than try to run from it, we discover a joy deeper and more lasting than any of the temporary joys that the world offers. So the question is simply this: will we remain in the vine?

²I am reminded of Jonathan and David. "The soul of Jonathan was bound to the soul of David, and Jonathan loved him as his own soul" (1 Samuel 18:1). Perhaps this helps us to understand the sort of relationship that we are to have with Jesus.

Reading the Gospel of John

John's gospel is different! It bears little resemblance to the synoptic gospels. Very few of the incidents in John are also found in the synoptics. John's gospel has very little in the way of ethical teachings such as we find in the Sermon on the Mount. John writes so that "you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name." (20:31).

In the synoptics, miracles are a means for Jesus to enact the reality of God's kingdom. In John's gospel, the miracles are signposts to Jesus' identity and nature. In the synoptic gospels, Jesus' true identity is often a secret to be protected until the right time. In John's gospel, Jesus' glory is revealed from the very beginning. For example, Jesus' first miracle is the changing of water into wine. John tells us that, "Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him." (2:11) In the synoptic gospels, Jesus takes Peter and two disciples to the mountaintop where he is transfigured (see Matt 17:1-9). The story of the transfiguration is not found in John – perhaps because we can best think of John's Gospel as the story of one grand transfiguration, revealing Jesus' eternal divinity while never surrendering Jesus' humanity.

Here are a few ideas to keep in mind as you read John's Gospel:

- John binds together the already/not yet we've discussed so often, emphasizing that God's kingdom has come already! Jesus says "Those who do not believe are condemned already, because they have not believed" (3:17) and "anyone who hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life, and does not come under judgment, but has passed from death to life" (5:24) As Richard Hays notes, this means that "for those in the believing community, eternal life is now." The glory of God's kingdom is fully revealed and present in Jesus.
- The immediate reality of God's kingdom is accomplished through the work of the Holy Spirit. Jesus says "If you love me, you will keep my commandments. And I will ask the Father and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever." (14:15) This Advocate/Helper teaches us, the community of believers, all things and reminds us of what Jesus said.
- In this community of faith, we are called to love one another just as Jesus has loved us. Rather than give us long passages of Jesus' teachings, John gives us the enacted parable of Jesus' washing the disciples feet (chapter 13), leading us to see Jesus' sacrificial love on the cross several chapters later.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

In her commentary on John, Gail O'Day made an observation about today's passage that really made me think. She notes that Jesus never urges the branches to grow, not even as the metaphor unfolds later in the chapter. It isn't growth that Jesus seeks from his disciples here, but fruit. They are to bear fruit, these acts of love that characterize his disciples. There are many ways for a vine to grow. Some are very showy, producing a beautiful canopy of branches and leaves, but little fruit. Jesus wants the fruit, not the canopy.

In what ways do we tend to emphasize the canopy, the show, in our own lives as Christians rather than the fruit? I'm sure most of us do from time to time. I know I do. A few weeks, my sermon included the lyrics of the Amy Grant song, "Fat Baby," about a showy but shallow Christian who had "the biggest King James you've ever seen." What are some examples of showy shallowness that you've seen from yourself or others? In what ways do churches emphasize the canopy, the show, rather than the fruit? How about St. Andrew?

In your own words, explain what you think it means to abide in Christ? What do you think is meant by the "being of discipleship?" How is this different from the doing of discipleship? How does our abiding in Christ and him in us lead to the production of abundant fruit? For many people, John is the most challenging of the Gospels. Often, we have an idea what Jesus means but it still seems elusive or ambiguous. Perhaps it takes a little more imagination and a little less analysis, knowing that in the effort, we can be transformed.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage. In 2007, the Lenten sermon series was drawn from John's Gospel. We read through the Gospel that year and the daily readings for this Lent will again take us through the entire Gospel.

<p>Monday, John 10:22-42 Jesus' revelation of his relationship with God culminates in v.38: "The Father and I are one." Why do you think that so many do not believe? Why do some believe?</p>	<p>Tuesday, John 11:1-16 Why do you think Jesus delays in going to Lazarus? What do you think he does for those two days? Why is Jesus glad that he wasn't there when Lazarus died?</p>
<p>Wednesday, John 11:17-27 Why is Martha and later Mary so caught up in "If only . . ."? What does Jesus mean by saying that those who believe in him will never die? Why does Jesus weep?</p>	<p>Thursday, John 11:28-44 Again, why is Jesus deeply disturbed? How does this resuscitation of Lazarus show the glory of God (v. 40)? Does Jesus ever pray for Lazarus' raising? How does this raising differ from Jesus' resurrection?</p>
<p>Friday, John 11:45-57 The Jewish high council passes a death sentence on Jesus. What is the irony in Caiaphas' talk of letting one man die? What does this scene say about Jesus' later appearance before the Jewish authorities after his arrest?</p>	<p>Saturday, John 12:1-11 Mary's anointing of Jesus foreshadows his burial. What do you find most surprising in this scene? Why do the chief priests want to execute Lazarus?</p>

