Hi,

Today’s updates:

* My noon Tuesday class on Genesis will meet today on [my Facebook ministry page](https://www.facebook.com/Scott-Engle-St-Andrew-UMC-110365790736617/?modal=admin_todo_tour).
* The links to my on-line classes, the video recordings of the classes, the class audio podcasts, and the archive of these daily emails can all be found at [www.scottengle.org](http://scottengle.org/scotts-weekly-classes/). All the postings are up-to-date.
* Don’t forget to [vote for your favorite hymn here](https://www.jotform.com/202296152204042?fbclid=IwAR3PCQD_EW-ScuozGaeQjsT5lUgiu0OGCOfSIa1Sln7cYupvzgqvqOxhsXU).

Today, we continue this series on Jesus’ “I am” statements in John’s Gospel; we explore Jesus’ meaning when he refers to himself as the “true vine.”

***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.**

**He 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.**

**And now, inhabitants of Jerusalem and people of Judah, judge between me and my vineyard.**

**What 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. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father 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 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.**

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

Today’s statement, “I am the true vine,” is part of Jesus’ extended metaphor in 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 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 his last meal and talk with his disciples, Jesus wraps 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 keeps 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.

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 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. 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?

*A bit more -- 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 understand Jesus’ sacrificial love on the cross several chapters later.

‘til tomorrow, grace and peace,

Scott