

Put Your Life on the Vine

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John 15:1-17

Sunday, March 10, 2019

For being invisible, holy, incredible, infinite and awe-inspiring, God sure does an excellent job of communicating with people.

When Jesus teaches he uses things to explain God that are very commonplace. Not only are these things relevant in the culture of his day, the examples Jesus uses are relevant centuries and millennia later to this very day. Today we have an easy to visualize and understand teaching of our connection with Jesus through his teaching on vines and branches. Jesus is the Vine (the true Vine), God the Father is the Gardener, and we are the branches.

At points this is a very sobering teaching. **Significant things are at stake here.** Jesus warns that,

[The Gardener] cuts off every branch in [Jesus] that bears no fruit. (John 15:2)

Branches are to be productive or there are significant consequences! The life-giving relationship between Vine and branch is severed. There is no feeding or growth happening, so the branch is done. Further warning appears in these words from Jesus,

If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. (John 15:6)

It is very important to note: "Fruit-bearing is not a test; that is, a branch does not have to demonstrate a level of productivity to be safe from destruction. Rather, fruit bearing is a by-product."¹ Any of us fretting about not being good enough or productive enough for the Vine, cast that thought out of your mind. This is a teaching about connection, NOT efficiency.

Before we put all this pressure on ourselves to be productive and useful and irreplaceable, something is stated over and over and over again in this passage.

Everything the branches need the Vine provides. Every place where we are lacking, Jesus steps up and steps in. If you need forgiveness, Jesus provides that. If you need grace, Jesus provides that. If you need strength and endurance, Jesus provides that. Jesus provides everything that we could possibly need.

Jesus speaks to this when He says, ***You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. (John 15:3)***

¹ Burge, Gary M. *The NIV Application Commentary*, p. 418

Our cleanness doesn't come from good behavior, or skill, or finally getting it all correct, or obedience. Our cleanness comes because of what Jesus has given us already. Our cleanness comes because of the words Jesus has spoken to us.

Jesus also says, ***No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. (John 15:6)*** The only possible way that we produce things that are good or enduring in the eyes of God is through being connected as branches to our source, the Vine. That's how we're productive. Not self-sufficiency and good behavior, but through our connection to Jesus. **The branches simply need to remain/abide.** We just have to "be" with Jesus, be with our Vine. The pressure is off! Sounds so simple! Just abide!

But, **how do you do that???** How do you just "be" connected to God?

For some of us when we hear people say things like:

- "Christianity isn't a religion, it's a relationship."
- "Jesus is my best friend!"
- "God talks to me all the time."

. . . it's very discouraging; because we simply do not have that sensation or feeling about God. We believe in God. We trust God. We know God knows us. But this "relationship" stuff? We've never experienced it. For some of us this intimate vine/branch stuff seems impossible.

But here's the thing about remaining and abiding in Jesus – it's going to look different for everyone! Just because I feel close to God or think deeply about God when I'm reading a book about Christian living doesn't mean that will work for someone else. Have you ever heard someone describe heaven as a church worship service that never, ever ends? When you heard that description did you then ask, "What are the other options?" Me too! Because worship through music does not help me feel the same connection to God that it makes other people feel. We all abide in Jesus differently. And that is ok. It's good!

Several years back Bruce led us as a staff and then as a congregation through a survey called Spiritual Pathways – this survey help us figure out the ways in which we feel closest to God or are engaged more deeply with God. (I printed off a few of these and left them on the Welcome Desk in the Fireside Room if you want to try this) Some of us discovered we are Activists – we are most God-focused when we are doing things for God. Others of us are Contemplatives – we sense God's presence in quiet and solitude. Others are Relational, others are Intellectual, others are Worship, others are Serving, others are Creation; ALL are connected as branches to the Vine that is Jesus Christ.

Because there are so many ways that people abide, I thought it would be a very good day for a cheat sermon. I asked a number of people how they abide in the vine that is Jesus. The reason I picked them is that I know that have a connection with God, and that their lives bear the fruit, or evidence, of that.

In sharing this, I want us to see opportunities to try similar things, and to find what connecting or abiding point with Jesus resonates with you.

These are not a pattern for anyone else to follow. These are habits and perspectives that help these people as branches abide in Jesus, the True Vine. Let's hear what they had to say.

Abiding Through Scripture. The Bible is the gift of God's Words to us. It is important that we learn from Scripture and have it point us to Jesus Christ. But the Bible can be very challenging to read and understand. So, get help! I asked Bea Nemeth how she abides in Jesus, and much of what she had to say involves Scripture:

I guess there are many things - I read 3 devotionals a day, do 2 weekly bible studies, read many passages of scripture with those and pray, some days more than others. I think I look for God throughout the day, in whatever I encounter - the Word, others, nature, etc. I also get together with Christian friends who I learn from. I usually would do my devotionals in the morning but sometimes I do them at night. I am doing devotionals by Oswald Chambers, Adrienne Rogers and Chuck Swindoll right now.

Bea does whatever she can to learn Scripture, and I know the fruit of this is evident in her life. Don't feel you have to do 2 or 3 different series, just start somewhere. But Bea has found, as many others have, that she just cannot get enough of reading the Bible and discovering Jesus there.

Abiding Through Prayer. Prayer for some of us is difficult. My attention span in prayer has a hard time passing 5 minutes! For people like Cheryl, this is where their life in the Vine runs deepest:

Praying in pictures. Some call it listening prayer. It's interactive with Him. Sometimes my skeptic gets in the way so I need to occupy that part of me with the task of writing what I see in a journal. Parables make great pictures to interact with. Eg. If a friend is in need I imagine lowering them through the roof to where the Lord Jesus is and then I watch what He does.

Dwelling on His attributes and the promises in His names are another means of staying connected but that really comes down to worship. Listening prayer is the big one. (Cheryl Karapita)

There are many ways to pray. People can pray like Cheryl, people can pray using the prayers of a prayer book, people can use the Lord's prayer as a model. There are many ways to abide through prayer.

Abiding in the Morning. When we hear about minding our connection to God in the morning, we often have some idyllic image in our minds, perhaps dating back to summer camp. You're sitting on the dock. The mist is hovering over the water. You have a Bible in one hand and a cup of coffee in the other.

But mornings are not often like that outside of summer camp. Mornings are crazy! Everyone is nuts! Everyone is late! But for some people, mornings are the best time of day to mind their connection to the Vine. One of our youth, Jesse, said:

***Doing devotions in the morning and music helps me.
I use a book that's called My Utmost For His Highest and I like it because they're short
and I can do them in the morning and think about it during the day.
Any Christian music [works] but I like the modern worship and Hillsongs and
Switchfoot. (Jesse Kennedy)***

Abiding is Messy . . . Some people are creatures of routine. For others routines for months and years do not work. Routines as they relate to Spiritual disciplines can become stale instead of connecting. With this in mind, I appreciate what Faye had to say:

I am terrible at "routine" and so I need variety to keep my spiritual journey fresh. Over the last three years I used the lectionary as my guide for going through Scripture and that kept me on track as I hate missing a week, once I make a commitment. I enjoyed sketching what I would preach if I was working with the passage that week so that was a helpful project for me.

Abiding is Messy . . . and Musical. For some of us music is what lets us know we are connected deeply to Jesus. Faye added,

The last three months I haven't picked up a new routine but I have been playing the piano more and choosing worship songs and hymns as music is always my go-to language for praise and prayer. My small groups are pretty key to keeping me engaged with Scripture and seeking Christ's presence in community. (Faye Reynolds)

Abiding is Active. This input is from the only person that *insisted* they stay anonymous. So out of respect to their wishes I shall refer to them as **K. Merkel**. No, perhaps I'll refer to them as **Kyle M**.

Anyhoo, they said going for walks is the way for them to connect with God. Being active helps them focus on God and avoid distractions. It also creates opportunities to talk with God and even to just be in his presence. Sometimes he will listen to reflective music and others he'll just walk quietly.

(Disclaimer: I'd never spill the name of someone requesting anonymity.)

Abiding is Intentional. I, and people like me, engage teaching through doodles. If I just sit and try to listen to a sermon, my mind goes everywhere (thank you, Obsessive Compulsive Disorder). But if I doodle what is being spoken about, I retain and apply what is being taught and I abide in Jesus in doing so. Taking notes goes a long way – we have this opportunity to learn together on Sunday mornings – make the most of it. Abide.

Abiding with Other Branches. Lawrence brought this into focus with his feedback: Jesus' teaching on the Vine and branches implies many people together, not an individual personal spiritual life.

The vine is an example of togetherness as there is Security in numbers. One wheat stock would be weak, susceptible to the elements, a lone bird less secure than in a flock. A vine can grow from any crack in a stone wall or rocks. It gets strength from water, nutrients in the soil and sun. I have been lucky to being born in a Christian Environment.

What keeps me in with Jesus is the promise of everlasting life and sustained by growing in fellowship like Church, Christian friends, Bible Study and Devos. I try to live an example of a Christian by encouraging non-believers as well. Knowing and doing good works also helps. (Lawrence Schinkel)

Abiding is Essential. Jesus said, apart from me you can do nothing. Richard keyed in on this.

Life takes us on different levels such that being consistent with something or remaining committed to someone creates uncertainty in our heart especially when we face life challenges that call for "on the spot decision."

But the question for me as a Christian is "what is the drive that keeps me going in life and makes me face life challenges every day?" "Who gives me hope, wanting to get up and face life challenges with a smile despite life's furious demands on me and my family?"

The question all the time is "who wakes me up in the morning?" And why does He want to wake me up?" "What has He got for me today?" He alone knows the plans He has for me every day. My answer always is in Paul's words in 2 Timothy 1:12 "...because I know whom I believed and am convinced that He is able to guard what I entrusted to Him until that day."

And Jesus said "... But take heart! I have overcome the world." John 16:33. Our life is in Him and He holds the world including our lives, in his hand. So... without Him we can do nothing.

However, our dependency calls for remaining in Him and depending on Him fully, even when things are not going well. He has all His children engraved in His palms. Isaiah 49:16. That is a good reason to remain in Him for He only holds the keys to life's meaning. (Richard Odei-Wontumi)

Abiding is Available Anywhere. An amazing thing about abiding in Jesus is that it can happen anywhere. It does not have to be isolated to a church or our homes. There are many ways we take the time and focus to abide in Jesus, Tracey illustrated this:

A few things that help me remain in/ abide in Jesus

- ***being in nature/ outside***
- ***prayer time***
- ***servicing others***
- ***sharing my time, talent and treasure (Tracey Faulkner)***

Hopefully, something that these people said about abiding in Jesus resonated with you. There are a number of ways to abide. But we must remember that **Abiding is About the Connection, not the discipline.** We know people who have very devout habits involving Bible reading or prayer or worship that have not had that those habits translate into fruit. Not every spiritually disciplined person is loving or kind. The Pharisees were the enemies of Jesus, and every single one of them were masters at prayer and Scripture. What matters is we connect to, hear from and grow in Jesus.

Jesus said in **John 15:7 - If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.**

Abiding doesn't change God . . . abiding changes us. We see & know & sense the heart of God. The things that God desires become our wish.

Abiding changes us. Abiding makes us bear fruit. Abiding glorifies God and points others to Jesus. We need Jesus, our Vine, desperately. Branches, do whatever it takes to abide in the True Vine.