

Jesus the Vine John 15 1-17

One of Betty and my weekend pleasures since moving to Bedford is driving around to some of the many local vineyards to sample the wonderful fruits of their labor. Thomas Jefferson was credited with first bringing viticulture to Virginia, but the rest of the story is that he largely failed because our weather is too moist for good grapes. Growing grapes here takes a lot more effort at disease prevention than in dryer locations, like California and Israel, where they more naturally flourish.

Israel has always identified itself as God's privileged vineyard, using the image of a grapevine with a cluster of grapes as a symbol of the nation's fruitfulness (remember what Moses' spies brought back, so large it had to hang on a pole between two of them?). The psalmist called Israel "**God's vine,**" taken out of Egypt and planted to grow deep roots in the Promised land (Psalm 80:8-10). Later, the prophet Isaiah would lament that Israel was God's lovingly tended vineyard, but it had only produced wild grapes (Isaiah 5:1-6). In Jesus' day, King Herod had even gifted the Temple with a golden grape vine of delicately-twisted gold wire and beads.

So this may have been what He was thinking about, on that last evening before His death, when Jesus made the very radical declaration that He alone was the "**true vine,**" with God, His Father as the "**vine grower**" and the disciples as "**branches.**"

Thus Jesus affirmed that nationality never had anything to do with it, but only those living in a personal relationship with God, with Himself, were members of the vine.

I emphasize this for you today, because that evening Jesus went on to specifically identify three ways in which we branches of God's true vine could bear much fruit:

- by continuing to live our life in Jesus and letting Him live His life in us,
- by continuing to live our life according to God's Word,
- and by continuing to love one another as much as He loves us.

We will get back to these fruitful ways in just a moment, but first let us start with the "vine and vine grower" to better understand what Jesus has been trying to tell us all along.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit He prunes to make it bear more fruit (John 15:1-2)

Healthy grape vines require constant, attentive care. If you ever visit a vineyard, you will notice that the vines are not allowed to grow freely, but rather, look like they have

been through military school. Every vine has been pruned to a uniform size and shape with branches trained to run along wires, leaves only on top with grape clusters hanging from leafless branches below; all this done to produce the most and best quality fruit. There are three principals behind such careful pruning.

1. First, new vines are vigorously pruned for 3-5 years in order to “train” them; encouraging them to grow deep roots before they are even allowed to produce a crop. In the same way, new believers require time and training to help them become rooted in their new faith.
2. From there on, pruning is done to remove any deadwood that could cause decay in the vine. God removes that which will hinder the vine from bearing of Godly fruit.
3. But vine dressers also prune live wood in order to improve the vine’s potential for fruit-bearing. Untrimmed vines develop unproductive growth – long, rambling branches with few grapes because the vine is focused more on spreading out than producing fruit. A trained vine can be very productive, yielding as much as 80 lbs of grapes in a season, and can continue to produce grapes for nearly 100 years.

Thus, by calling Himself the vine and us His fruitful branches, **Jesus declares, that as His followers, we have been re-born to re-produce.** We now live as branches in God’s vineyard drawing our life and growth from Christ Jesus – the only “true vine” — which God personally cares for and cultivates. We can be assured that this Gardener is nurturing every one of us, paying close attention to and pruning every single branch. Such pruning is not punishment; it is lovingly done so that the vine can be even more productive; so that we may bear much fruit for God’s kingdom.

³You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.

After talking about dead branches being removed to be burned, Jesus said this to assure His disciples and us, that if we have come to Him in faith, then we are healthy branches on the vine. The word translated here as “**cleansed,**” is actually the same word that was earlier translated “**pruned.**” So we who have come to God in faith have already been pruned. As Jesus walked the countryside, the casual followers – those lacking any of His true life in them – were eventually cut off, removed. Judas was an example of a dead branch that was cut off; Peter is an example of a live branch that was pruned – in his case, several times – for better growth.

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.**

But having begun in Jesus, this vine illustration teaches us that **all our lives, we must continue to draw our life from Him.**

We need to realize that the word **"abide"** as Jesus used it here is a statement of fact, or a command, or a plea; or all three of these ideas rolled up into a single meaning. Jesus is saying that if we wish to live a fruitful life, we need to stay attached to Him. As the "true vine," He is our only source of life. Apart from His life – His spiritual empowerment – flowing through us, we can do nothing.

- Our success is not the result of self-achievement, but of abiding in Christ.
- We are fruitful because of the Vine. We cannot bear fruit on our own.
- We cannot survive apart from the True Vine.
- We cannot accomplish anything of permanent value apart from Christ.

So, **"abide"** is a powerful word that we need to better understand, But it is also an antique word which for us carries little meaning. A better way of grasping the idea behind this word would be to say, **"continue to live within."** Thus, to be fruitful, we must continue to live within Jesus, which gives His three **"abides"** a new depth of meaning that we need to pay careful attention to.

Continue to live within me as I continue to live within you.

Continue to live within my word

Continue to live within my love, by loving one another.

I must admit that this first "abide" carries with it more mystical weight than we Presbyterians are usually comfortable with. We read Jesus saying such things as, *those who love me will keep my word, and my Father will love them, and **we will come to them and make our home with them.*** (John 14:23).

The Apostle Paul writes, *I have been crucified with Christ; and it is no longer I who live, but **it is Christ who lives in me.** And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.* Galatians 2:19-20

He also warned errant Christians, *do you not know that you are God's temple and **that God's Spirit dwells in you?** If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.* 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

All this is not just religious language; in a very real way, when we first asked Christ to be our savior, He did so by sending His Spirit thereafter to live within us, thus rebirthing and securing us as members of God's family. Just as His continued life becomes our

continued life, our hands now become His hands, our work now becomes His work. This was God's mystery, kept hidden for ages but revealed in Jesus for everyone to understand; **it is Christ living in you which gives you your hope for glory.** (Colossians 1:27)

As I was thinking about this idea of Christ and me living a completely shared life, He in me and me in Him, I was reminded of something He told the crowds when He named Himself, "God's true bread sent down from Heaven." Here it is.

Those who eat my flesh and
drink my blood have eternal life
Those who eat my flesh and
drink my blood abide in me, and I in them.
(John 6:54-56)

A great many of His casual followers were offended by this and departed. Jesus would later tell His remaining disciples that He was speaking in spiritual terms – *it is the Spirit that gives life the flesh does nothing* – and we now relate this comment of His to the Communion meal which we share. But did you notice the word "abide" again showing up here? When we eat the bread, we say, *the body of Christ*, and when we drink the juice we say, *the blood of Christ*. Yes this is a symbolic act, but on a spiritual level it is a continuous reenactment of us taking the life of Jesus within our bodies so that we might live together thereafter.

So we cannot escape the truth that our hopes of being fruitful now and having eternal life thereafter are based on our "continuing to live within" Christ and He "continuing to live within" us.

George Whitfield conducted outdoor evangelistic campaigns in the 1700's throughout New England, a period of revival called the "Great Awakening." Though thousands responded to his preaching, when asked how many were converted after one of his sermons he replied, "*We will know in five years.*" The point Whitfield was making was that five years should reveal which decisions were superficial and which were genuine, lasting commitments to Christ.

How can we know if we are "abiding" – "continuing to live within" Christ? When our lives are producing fruit.

The fruit of the Spirit does not come about by human effort, but only as we continuously draw our nourishment from His vine. Thus, Christ's command to "abide" is not fulfilled in a single act, but is an on-going life united to Christ. As Jesus said, ***apart from me you can do nothing.***

This is a mysterious concept with deeply profound implications for our life. So, let's pause for a moment to further dwell on this idea of our current and future life being dependent on this first most critical "abide." **If the only life we truly have is the one in**

which we continue to live within Christ and which we also continue to let Him live in and through us, how then are we living out this reality right now, tomorrow, and for the rest of our lives?

what should Jesus
and I
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There was a historic Christian movement which has occasionally resurfaced, complete with wrist bands and all the related paraphernalia, which in every situation we were supposed, to ask, ***What would Jesus Do?*** Now, we know the more real question we should be asking is, ***what should Jesus and I be doing together, today?***

--(pause) --

The next two abides may be more graspable but no less demanding. If you [continue to live within me], ***and my words [continue to live within in you], ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*** John 15:7

How do we nourish our spirit – and also God’s Spirit now living within us? By continuing to feed on God’s Word. The Jews of Jesus day were known as “people of the Book,” a title we Christians have come to share. We believe God intentionally revealed Himself through the written word which, beginning with Moses, He commanded to be written down and read to the people.

The greatest command given to the Hebrew nation - and us – which was to Love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself – was then immediately followed by the instruction that we are to keep these commands in our hearts, talking about them, reciting them to our children, and writing them on the doorposts of our homes. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

This is why the psalmist declared, *I have stored up your word in my heart, so that I might not sin against you.* Psalm 119:11

And why Paul urged his disciple Timothy to, *continue in what you have learned and firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it, and how from childhood you have known the sacred writings that are able to instruct you for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God may be proficient, equipped for every good work.* 2 timothy 3:14-17

Surely our Christian faith is lived out – proved – by what we do and say, but our source of spiritual strength comes to us by continuing to feed on God’s Word.

As we continue to live within God’s Word, we are also given a promise that our prayers will be answered. As we mature in our faith, our prayers mature; we

start to want what God wants us to have. We understand God's purpose as we study His word, which causes our prayers to be wise. And we desire more than anything that God's perfect will should be accomplished in the requests we lift up to Heaven.

So we next must ask ourselves, how have we continued to feed on the meat of God's word? Or have we killed our spiritual appetites by relying too much on prepackaged snippets of God thought.

Then there was Jesus' third command to "abide," and this one He clearly labeled as a command. *As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will [continue to live in] my 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.* (John 15:10-12)

God's Love for us is what first united us to Christ – *for God so loved, He gave* – now as branches on His vine, we must continue to let His love flow through us and out into the world.

The apostle John wrote his first letter to the Churches emphasizing this singular command. *Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.* He even went as far to say that, *whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.* (1 John 4:7-8).

Here is the critical "if/then" truth. Only **IF** we continue to live within Christ, letting Him continue to live within us as we continue in His Word and in loving one another as He commanded us **THEN** we will bear much fruit. **So what is the fruit that God is looking for out of our lives?**

The fruitfulness that God is seeking from us is of much greater variety than we often think.

- Certainly winning others to Christ is being fruitful: Romans 1:13
- But our own coming in faith to Christ was also part of God's harvest John 4:35-38
- And as we grow in holiness and obedience, that is fruit Romans 6:22
- Our Christian giving in support of church ministry and mission is fruit Romans 15:26-28
- The good works we do in the name of Christ is fruit: Colossians 1:10
- God's praise that comes from our hearts and lips is fruit: Hebrews 13:15
- And all the characteristics that flow from our godly hearts – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control; all this is the fruit growing from Christ's Spirit continuing to live within: Galatians 5:22-23

But of course all this fruitfulness is conditioned by that big **IF**: *if you continue to live within me and My words continue to live within you* Which may cause us to read these three "abides" with apprehension, afraid that if we mess up we will be cut off. And so Jesus would have us remember this one more fundamental truth about our Christian life: **We only chose Him because He first chose us.**

You did not choose me but I chose you. And I appointed you to go and bear fruit, fruit that will last, so that the Father will give you whatever you ask him in my name. I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another. John 15:16-17

In another divine mysterious dance between God's election and our decisions, Jesus assures us that from birth, to our first act of faith, and to our faithful life that follows, that we have always been and now remain known, loved, and secured, because God first knew us. Jesus takes us as we are. *We have already been cleansed*, and He is patient with us. He will prune us when necessary, but will not forsake us. We can trust all of our life to the care of our loving, Heavenly Gardener. As He told His disciples, *you have already been pruned*.

So do not worry about being cut off, but rather focus your concern on how you might be even more fruitful in God's vineyard, as we continue to draw our life from Jesus, the true vine on which we grow as His branches.

Let us not only pray about this today, but every day for the rest of our God given lives.