



Calvary Presbyterian Church
Sunday, SEPTEMBER 17, 2023

Christening Calvary: "The Sailing Life"
Rev. Eyde Mabanglo

NEW TESTAMENT READING

John 15:1-8/NRSV, updated edition

Jesus the True Vine

¹“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. 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.

SERMON

Jesus makes a bold statement to his disciples in John 15 when he identifies himself as **The True Vine**. For us to better understand what Jesus meant by this particular "I AM" statement, we need to pause for a moment and get our bearings - if we look at the surrounding Scriptures and examine the movement of Jesus teachings in this Gospel, we may be able to better connect to Jesus' meaning as he bids us to better connect with Him.

The passage is part of what is called the "Farewell Discourse". Jesus and his friends have just left the 'upper room' where he has shared one of his most intimate moments with them. In this setting, we remember a woman who washed Jesus' feet by pouring out precious perfume on them and wiping them with her own hair.

This act foreshadows Jesus' own death as it resembles preparing someone for burial, but even this act of extravagance pales in comparison to the love Jesus pours out on the cross for all of humanity. This room is also where Jesus washes the feet of his disciples - after correcting them for judging the actions of the woman as wasteful, he puts on a towel and picks up a basin and shows them what it means to truly love selflessly and then bids them to do the same.

In this same room, Jesus speaks of preparing other rooms...other dwelling places...where those who follow after Jesus will abide forever. These abodes or mansions or dwelling places are difficult to picture, but they are not so difficult to understand when we reflect on the many different ways that God has created dwelling places for himself and his people throughout Scripture. These intimate moments point to the heart of an intimate God. Jesus himself shows us how intimacy with him can be experienced now while he also promises an eternal intimacy with the Father and the Son. Abiding is about residency with God. It is all about the Spirit or Wind of Christ. It is about prayer.

Later in John's Gospel, the disciples travel to a place of prayer with Jesus. In the garden of Gethsemane, Jesus prays to God on behalf of his disciples. We get to listen in on the intimate relationship of the Father and Son which is best described as one of communion. It is within this prayer that the Gospel writer gets to pour out his theology of how each of us has been invited to share in the eternal communion of our Triune God - it is an invitation to abide with the Spirit or Wind of Christ...to abide with God.

We might picture at this moment how Jesus traveled with his disciples between the upper room and the garden... they walked from clusters of houses to clusters of trees...they walked from town to country...they walked past orchards...past a vineyard or two. Because in the Gospel of John, sandwiched between the intimacy of the upper room and the intimacy of

the garden, is Jesus' statement about the True Vine, and it behooves each of us to hear this "I AM THE VINE" proclamation as an intimate message. It is intended to be a direct message from the heart of God to the heart of every true believer. And for every person here, may your own heart hear.

The imagery of the vine and the vineyard are not new to God's people Israel. In the other Gospels, we hear how Israel might be referred to as the vine. In Psalm 80, the psalmist writes about how God planted his vineyard - Israel as a people. Israel is a vineyard. Israel is a place. The vineyard, the people, the land is best understood as a promised land or promised dwelling place for God. God is seen as the planter, the protector, and the pruner of the vineyard. These words help us to see how the vineyard must rely on the vinedresser.

In today's passage, Jesus makes a startling statement when he says that he is The True Vine. For generations, the People of God saw their identity in relation to the Land of God - Israel. Israel was a place and a people; Israel was The Place and The People! As the vineyard of God, Israel assumed that the only connection with God would come through them. Now, Jesus was saying that the only connection with God would come through Him. In this way, Jesus is eradicating the traditional dividing lines between Greek and Jews, male and female, slave and free...the disciples must resist the traditional thinking of their own religion that presumed Israel was the only and final worship location for the people of God. As The True Vine, Jesus was identifying himself as the only place of worship, the only temple they need to be drawn to, the only dwelling place for them to live.

Jesus introduces the language of the true vine to teach about his 'abiding' relationship with us. This passage will eventually describe the fruit of the vine branches, but the vital part of the passage is the vital relationship between the vine and the branches - between Jesus and every one of us. If we focus on the fruit at the expense of the vine, then we risk becoming dead wood and forfeit any fruitfulness anyway. The threat to most Christians and Christian churches is the insidious assumption that they no longer need to trust nor rely on God to produce fruit in their ministry. This has been the ongoing demise of Christendom and it still threatens every local church today. This is why Jesus says that we can do nothing apart from Him. Without God, we return to that whence we came. If God created us out of

nothing, then without God we return to nothing. Just as a branch is nothing without the vine, so we are nothing without a relationship with the Spirit of Christ (God's Holy Power/God's Holy Wind).

How do you experience Jesus as the vine - our vine? It is important for us to know ourselves as branches, but before we take a look at what it means to be a good branch, we must yield for a moment (more accurately to yield for a lifetime) to honor the vinedresser. The role of the vinedresser has always been and will always remain to be God, the Father. The vine, the branches, the fruit - all give glory to the vinedresser. As I said before, it is tempting to become so enthralled as a successful branch that we forget that we rely on the vine and the mercy of the vinedresser. Our ability and capacity to make fruit is not within us, but solely within the life of the vine. The vinedresser knows what needs to be pruned from the branches to make the entire vineyard strong, fruitful, and lasting. As a Christian, I must yield to the vinedresser to prune me. Pruning sounds like a violent activity at first glance, but it is a delicate, labor intensive, and vital task for the vinedresser. The branch cannot prune itself. A branch cannot prune a fellow branch. So, too, a Christian cannot restore himself or restore a fellow Christian. We must learn to yield every moment of every day to the all-knowing mercy of God.

Early in the season, a vinedresser examines the vine and discards dead wood. A branch may need to have quite a bit of dead canes cut from it, but the branch still 'remains' on the vine. It is meant to be a permanent relationship. Later in the season, the vinedresser may return to cut off overgrowth that shields the branch from the sun which gives the fruit its flavor. The vinedresser also looks for other types of overgrowth like suckers that tend to consume life from the vine, but do not produce fruit. Anything that doesn't contribute to the fruit bearing is what is cut away. Our lives are so busy that we might not recognize the 'overgrowth' or 'suckers' that threaten our fruitfulness. When I pause long enough to reflect on how urgent things crowd out important things, I am embarrassed how much of my life has been consumed by concerns, worries, relationships, and things that do not bear fruit for God. These are the very things that God wants to cleanse me from. Even church matters can become cumbersome to my life as a branch. How many times have I let little things become the very things that make me ungracious and unkind even within my church family. My

heart as a branch is full of dead wood and/or 'sucker's that I am desperate for him to prune. When I pray, "Purify My Heart" or "Create in Me a Clean Heart" then I am asking him to resume the role of vinedresser in my life and to strengthen my relationship with The True Vine to His Glory and Honor.

At the very core of this passage is Jesus' invitation to be in constant contact with him! The language of abiding and remaining was introduced in John 14 with the resounding refrain of "MENO"--abide/abode, dwell/dwelling/indwelling, reside/residence. Just as Jesus asks us to inhabit his heart, he wants to inhabit ours. Abiding is a language of lovers, and we need to hear it as such. The bride/groom metaphor for God's love for his people and Christ's love for the church is beautiful and prevalent throughout Scripture. Just as the radio waves for generations have broadcast love songs all over the world, so Scripture broadcasts the love of God welcoming a lover back into his embrace. The Song of Songs is rich with this kind of language. The Book of Hosea depicts God's love as that of a forgiving lover. The New Testament describes you and me as the Bride of Christ and the groom as the steadfast lover who will lay down his life for his beloved. We all have our favorite love story or love song that makes us weep with joy because of the beautiful devotion and adoration portrayed there in, but no love story can compare to the story of God giving himself to restore our relationship with his heart and his purposes for us.

I think this is what Jesus is saying when he says "remain in me".
Abiding is the language of loving, but it is also the language of staying.

Prayer (From the Lutheran Church of Australia)

Attending and Abiding God, you are the true vine, and we are the branches. By your Spirit, produce the fruit of love, joy, peace, and patience in us for others to taste and enjoy.

Keep us from hanging on to love for ourselves. Prune all selfishness from us and fill us with your love.

May it be so.

