

I am the true vine

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Preacher: Rev. Brian Williams

- [0 : 0 0] and continues his tale of his toothache. And there the story ends. And you have this distinct impression that what was real in the story was his vivid and demanding toothache. That it was much more real than the sort of distinct and hazy cross he saw up on the hill. And you get the impression that Andriyev concurs with his character's indifference. Just another man died. For what possible relevance could it have to his toothache? To his merchant business? To his life with Samuel and Sarah? And we come to John 15 this morning and it says, Remain, remain, remain, remain in the vine. And some of us, no matter how long we've been in the church, been Christians, no longer how long we've been clergy, no longer how long we've studied the Bible, ask ourselves, why? Why remain? And what is it all about? Maybe with somewhat less indifference than Bentobit, we still ask, what possible relevance does it all have to my toothache?
- [1 : 1 0] My business? My life with my spouse and friends? And even if we don't wonder, wonder perhaps, why remain? we still wonder, what is life supposed to be like on the vine? These are two questions which naturally surface in each of us and naturally come to the fore in the text, I think. In this discourse of Jesus, given to his disciples, trying to prepare them for his imminent death and departure. In these verses, John and Jesus take us into very deep theological water and ask us to swim very quickly. And this morning, with the shortened homily, they ask us to swim very, very quickly. But Jesus says these things on the night of the Last Supper. He's already washed the disciples' feet. He's broken bread, broken and given them the wine. Judas has laughed together the soldiers to arrest Jesus. And Jesus speaks these words about the vine to his Jewish disciples who when they hear them, when they hear the words vine, have this whole flood of images, some of which I shared with the kids.
- [2 : 1 3] You see, they knew Israel was supposed to be God's fruitful vine. But that Israel had continually failed. Even the briefest of spin through Israel's history brings us to the fore. I mean, it's from the golden calf to the grumbling in the wilderness to Saul's sin to the Baal worship to the wicked kings. Israel had failed to be God's covenant partner. And the disciples would have known of Isaiah's words. Isaiah said, My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only bad fruit. What more could have been done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad? When Jesus says, I am the true vine, in John 15, he must have startled his disciples.

Yeah, they were accustomed to his hard sayings and to his somewhat opaque parables, but in saying, I am the vine, he takes up this image of broken and alienated Israel and reverses their fortune, really, by showing that he has fulfilled the role as God's covenant partner that Israel didn't fulfill.

[3 : 28] He has taken the one image that, yes, applied to Israel, but it applied to Israel in all of its lostness and judgment, in all of its incredible indifference to God and its faithlessness, and he applies it to himself.

He becomes the true vine which restores Israel and restores humanity and presents humanity back to God in perfect covenant faithfulness. The people of God are now no longer those who are rooted in the promised land, but those who are rooted in Christ.

He becomes this not only for Israel, obviously, but for each one of us. John 15 reminds us that if we live, if we live at all, we live by participating in his life rather than being discarded like a withered branch.

We participate in his love rather than judgment, and we participate in his joy and his intimacy with the Father rather than in our own very unnatural alienation.

You see, this is a remarkable image of Jesus as both God and man in John 15.1. We know this to be the seventh and final I am statement of Jesus in John.

[4 : 42] I am was the name Yahweh had given to Moses at the burning bush, the name Israel knew for God. And here Jesus in John says, I am.

I am the light, the life, the bread, the water. And so he says, I am, meaning I am Yahweh, the God of Abraham and Moses, the God you knew in the wilderness.

But he says, I am the vine. I am alienated and lost humanity. I am wayward Israel under judgment. You see, Christ lived the life we were intended to live and does so on our behalf and then draws us through his spirit into his life of worship and communion with the Father.

I mean, that's the whole thrust of these small, these five words. I am the true vine. God in love gives himself to the world and becomes his own covenant partner.

In his commentary on Galatians, Luther has a wonderful section about Christ standing under judgment. He has God saying to Jesus, you be Peter, that denier, Paul, that persecutor, David, that adulterer, the thief on the cross, that person who committed the sins of all mankind and we might add any myriad of unsavory characters from the Old Testament or our friends and family or whoever.

[6 : 05] But this really only captures one side of Jesus' life. For he not only stood under condemnation, but he lived the life we were to live and he lived the life we are called to participate in.

The whole of John 15 then seems to me it's a summons to wake up, to see with the eyes we've been given what true life in the vine is like, what participation in the death and the life of the Son.

You see, this has to be the foundation for any discussion of the rest of the passage about remaining. Because too often we read verses like this rather selectively and we see something like this.

He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit so remain, remain, do, love, obey, go, lay down your life, have joy, make yourself joy, make a joyful noise and do it now.

And we feel cast back upon our own very meager resources and upon our own steeled determination in order to produce our own fruit and make ourselves love and we've no idea how to do that.

[7 : 15] But this passage relieves us of that pressure. You see, the Father here is the Creator who knows His creature. The Master Gardener who knows His garden and what it is for the garden to flourish.

What it is for the garden to have life-giving life. The picture here of mutual indwelling is not one of a Christ who came, lived, died, was resurrected and ascended and then left us to work out our own life and faith than our own meager way.

It's really the picture that underlies Paul's declaration in Galatians where he says, God sent the Son, the Spirit of His Son into our hearts. The Spirit who calls out Abba, Father.

And John's own statement in his first epistle, we live in Him and He in us because He has given us His Spirit. the Spirit who takes us up into the life of dependence and love and intimacy with the Father, of joy, obedience, and friendship first, so that we can then remain and do and love and lay down our life and so forth.

You see, this is life on the vine. This participation in Christ's life is that which produces that sweet cluster of grapes that only fit for a sumptuous bottle of wine.

[8 : 42] When we ask, why remain? We can only come to the answer that only in life, only in participation in Christ is there life at all.

When we come to the second question, what does it look like to remain? We start in verse 7 and we ask ourselves, what does it look like to be in the vine? And Jesus says, ask whatever you will and it will be done.

By this my Father is glorified that you bear much fruit. Abide in my love as I have loved you. Keep my Father's commandments. These things I have spoken to you that joy may be in you and that your joy may be full.

Greater love has no man than this that he lay down his life. You are my friends. I don't call you servants any longer. You did not choose me. I chose you. Abide in me. Love one another. Amen.

See, life in the vine is really a gradual restoration of our humanity. A renewal and fulfillment of all that we were created for.

[9 : 44] Life on the vine looks like Jesus. Who he was and what he did. He says that in love for us and love for the Father he laid down his life for us and in response he says love one another.

He prayed to the Father and invites us to utter with him our Father who art in heaven not my will but thine be done. He lived in complete obedience and dependence upon the Father and called us to do the same and to experience the freedom that obedience truly gives.

His joy was to do the Father's will and so he reveals to us that our joy our fullness of joy is in doing the Father's will in obedience and love.

I mean how often we hear the clamoring voices around us saying this is where your true joy is this is where your true fulfillment is this is where your true happiness is and so often those are shallow and ephemeral and withering like the branch that withered.

Finally he calls us to intimate communion with the Father. He calls us into intimacy with him. You see in the Old Testament Abraham and Moses were called friends of Yahweh.

[10 : 59] Here the incarnate Yahweh calls us friends because he has revealed himself to us and asked us to participate in his life. It's really a stunning concept a stunning reality and in light of all this the command to remain which is sort of a refrain from this passage almost seems rhetorical.

It almost seems like telling us to breathe or eat. It's what makes the choice of the branch that left the vine so absurd so tragic but the Lord knows the human condition and so the command to remain is not so unnecessary.

You see more than any other truth or as much as any other truth we know the truth of verse 2 every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit because we know that as branches we very naturally tend to grow wild and untrained and it's not pruning because God doesn't know what it's like to be human doesn't know what it's like to suffer doesn't know what it's like to face the particular pressures and anxieties we face but precisely because he does know what it's like to be human and precisely because he does know what is required for us to become truly human you see the master gardener doesn't use his pruning life carelessly or in vain though often we mistake the pruning of the gardener I think for the gardener's absence but pruning is a cutting back to produce more fruit pruning is life giving pruning helps the branch produce the fruit it was created intended to produce there is a time for pruning as well as a time for flowering and fruit bearing pruning may be the gardener allowing us to continue in our disordered desires until we reach a point where our failure is so evident to us and those around us that we can do nothing but submit to pruning and wait through the winter for the time of fruit bearing pruning might be being close to that person who has failed and learning to extend them love and grace as we have been shown love and given grace my sister-in-law

Kim's sister April and her husband David recently had a baby boy Avery and shortly after he was born found out that Avery has an extra chromosome so Avery was born with Down syndrome and I think they feel like it's a pruning not that they don't love Avery not that they're not enamored with Avery absolutely not but that his condition came unexpectedly and undesired but through that pruning God has already started to move them from the very secure world they expected to find his parents to a world of greater dependence on a very secure God even as they weep why to God they are waiting for the fruit bearing they wait in hope of the promise for fruit and these words of Christ come to the apostles on the night of grape pruning these words come just a few hours before

Jesus is arrested Peter denies he knows Jesus the apostle John sits with Jesus his mother at the foot of the cross and watch Jesus Jesus die and when all the other apostles flee into hiding but life on the vine for us is all of this it's pruning pruning for the sake of fruit fruit that is born of participation in the life of the son who has taken up our broken humanity in a very real way in a way that keeps Andrew here you have story about Ben Tobit fiction and makes the gospel of John absolute reality to which we are called to wake up to which we respond in love to love to which we experience joy intimacy dependence communion with the father communion with the other branches on the vine and communion in Christ's mission to a world in such need of the good news that he has bound up our broken humanity and invites us to true human flourishing and on that basis and with that picture he says remain in me as I remain in you love one another as I have loved you