

Abide in Me

Isaiah 55:1-7, John 15:1-11 (ESV)

June 10, 2007

“I am the vine; you are the branches.” What a wonderful image of our relationship to Jesus Christ! Did you realize we were that close? Do you see what this means not only for our relationship with God and with his Christ but also for our relationship with each other? “I am the vine; you are the branches.” This does *not* say that we can see Jesus from a distance. This does *not* say that we can hear him faintly. This does *not* say that he is watching over us casually. Instead, this does say that we are in Christ and that Christ is in us. This does say that we are alive because of Christ and that Christ himself lives in us. We are not the only place that Christ lives or the only life that Christ has, but the life that Christ does live in us is good and real and true. “I am the vine; you are the branches.” This is good news, life giving news, words of truth and hope, gospel that we need to hear again and again.

William Temple notes of this passage that Jesus does *not* say that he is only the stem or trunk of the vine and that we are merely branches or limbs attached to it. Instead, Jesus does say that he is the whole vine and that we are members of him. Christ is in us, and we are in Christ. I suspect that we normally think about this image of the vine in the first way, as distinct trunk and limbs, but consider what a difference Temple’s insight makes. We are not unrelated attachments. We are part of the body of Christ. Our detachment from him would not be an insignificant rearrangement of parts but instead would be a loss to the body as a whole and would mean death to us. When Jesus says, “I am the vine; you are the branches,” this means that Christ is in us, as we are a true part of the vine that he is, and it means that we are in Christ, who is the whole of the vine. So the image Christ uses does *not* suggest as a model for our relationship the juncture of trunk and limb, as close as that may be, but instead it urges upon us the reality of the closer relationship of mutual indwelling.

Not only do our very lives—as confused and chaotic as they may seem—have roots deep in the will and purposes of God, but also our lives—as short and uncertain as they may seem—have goals and direction in the good will and purposes of God yet to be accomplished. Life is not a cosmic accident. We are not alone. We have not been abandoned. We are not neglected or unloved. Instead, we have been brought into the very life of the only begotten Son of God, maker of heaven and

earth, given out of the love of the Father for the world, that all who believe in him may not perish, but have eternal life. This is the good news.

At the same time that we hear this good news, and as a part of our hearing it, we realize that the gospel is spoken into the context of the harsh realities of the disconnectedness and brokenness of human life. These are why we need the gospel. These are why we appreciate the gospel. In Thomas Wolfe's novel, *Look Homeward, Angel*, Eugene Gant is a stranger—not only the eccentric of the state university campus, not only one never understood by his town's people, and not only a stranger to his own family, but also, finally, a stranger to himself. In the alienations of his life, we can see that our lives are disconnected and disjointed.

Blanche DuBois, in *A Streetcar Named Desire*, is incapable of establishing and maintaining relationships and so lives a life of disappointment and despair. We, too, know about the difficulty of attempting to make connections, to create community, to belong to family, to have friends, to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. This is part of why it sounds so good to us when Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." When we consider our own experience of life as disconnectedness, as broken relationships, as a deep and overwhelming and unspeakable loneliness, we realize what good news this connectedness is!

Who is there among us who has not known the loneliness? Some of our most common human experiences have to do with the brokenness, alienation, and isolation of life. And yet, it is into this situation that Jesus speaks again the ancient words, "I am the vine; you are the branches." Into this situation Jesus speaks again the good news: we are connected to him and so to each other; we are in relationship; he has a love for us so powerful that neither despair nor even death can defeat it. So alienation is *not* the final truth about life. The truth is, says Jesus, You are mine, and I will not forsake you. The truth is, says Jesus, that even when everything else in life counts against it, we are still connected and you are never alone. The good news is that love and community are realities, the truth of our lives in Jesus Christ.

There is more. We know only too well that life is not only disjointed and disconnected but is also broken beyond our repair. We have done things we cannot undo. We have left undone many good things for which we will never have another opportunity. Hence, we need forgiveness. Shakespeare depicts this in *Macbeth*. After he has murdered King Duncan, stabbing him in his sleep, Macbeth sees his bloody hand and says:

"What hands are here? ha! they pluck out mine eyes.
Will all great Neptune's ocean wash this blood
Clean from my hand? No, this my hand will rather

The multitudinous seas incarnadine,
Making the green one red.”

Macbeth knows the enormity of his own evil, that the blood on his hands would turn all the world’s oceans red, instead of the oceans cleansing him.

Lady Macbeth at first denies and belittles the problem: “A little water clears us of this deed: How easy is it then!” Later, however, she, too, is completely overwhelmed and devastated:

“Out, damned spot! out, I say!...
What, will these hands ne’er be clean?...
Here’s the smell of the blood still:
all the perfumes of Arabia will not sweeten this little hand....
What’s done cannot be undone.”

Thus Shakespeare portrays the evil and the tragic. By the extreme example of premeditated murder, he shows in exaggerated form the human predicament we all face, that of needing a cleansing from ourselves, a cleansing greater than we ourselves can accomplish. Even the physician attending Lady Macbeth admits: “This disease is beyond my practice.”

Jesus Christ says to us, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Already clean! Done! Accomplished! Here are words of grace and forgiveness. Here God in Christ does for us that which we cannot for ourselves. Jesus says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Your sin is forgiven. This does not undo our evil, or rewrite the past. But it takes away the contamination. It changes the present and sets a whole new stage for the future. In that not only our finitude and stupidity but also our sin has isolated and estranged us, God’s love and forgiveness in Jesus Christ have regathered us to God, restored us to Christ, and healed relationships long broken. Thus God in Jesus Christ has already provided for our deepest need. This is why the word about vine and branches sounds so good to us. We know that we have no power of our own to be a part of the life of Jesus Christ. We know that we have ruined that relationship. But now we hear that Christ has made us clean, by the sheer power of his word, by his gospel we preach yet today, by the forgiveness of our sin, and so, having been made clean, we rejoice in being united with Jesus Christ.

“Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” That tells the good news of what Jesus has already accomplished for us. That forgiveness is the basis for all the rest of the good news, including the current reality of our lives: “I am the vine; you are the branches.” What of the future? What are the

implications of the gospel for us? What claims does Christ make upon us as his own? Here we find a cluster of exhortations and expressions: abide, bear fruit, my word, glorified, love, joy. Here we shift from explanation and declaration to encouragement and commandment. Jesus says, “Abide in me, and I in you.” The word “abide” is used ten times in today’s reading from the gospel. It is an important word throughout John’s writings, and this is its most concentrated usage. We might translate it as live in me, dwell in me, remain in me, stay in me.

When Jesus says, “Abide in me, and I in you,” he is building on the image of the vine and branches, and he is building on the truth of our hard won connectedness and relatedness, to give us a word of hope, power, strength, and encouragement. Our natural tendency would be to try to break away. Our tendency would be toward death instead of life. Our tendency would be toward brokenness and alienation all over again. But Jesus says, Keep living the new life I have won for you. Know that I am living in you, and let that give you strength to keep living in me. Indeed, it is the purpose of the life of Christ to give us life. So the encouragement to abide in Christ steers us away from countless dead end roads.

The goal of this abiding is expressed as bearing much fruit for the glory of God. This means living a Christian life. Abiding in Christ should overflow into “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control” (Galatians 5:23 (ESV)). These glorify God. Their absence betrays God. Christ is clear that every branch of his which fails to bear fruit will be taken away, cast forth, thrown into the fire, and burned. It is the great, terrible, negative possibility of human life that God’s grace will *not* elicit gratitude from us, that God’s love will *not* call forth our love, that God’s joy does *not* spark our joy, that the peace of God does *not* lead us to peace, and that God’s patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control somehow do *not* call forth the same from us. This is terrible, but it is possible. Thus ingratitude is a sure sign of lostness. It is this terrible negative possibility against which Christ warns us. It is to the opposite, to the full and abundant Christian life of faith and love, that Christ urges us as an appropriate expression of our abiding in him.

And the way of this abiding is made clear. Jesus says it is accomplished by his words abiding in us. Just as we were cleaned by the power of the word, so do we live and abide by the power of the word. Think how often we eat and drink and breathe to maintain our bodies. Do we read the Bible and hear the word of God preached often enough and deeply enough that the word abides in us, lives in us, dwells in us, remains in us, and stays in us, and that through the word, Christ abides in us?

Abide in me, and my words in you, bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples. Now Jesus comes to the climax of today’s reading: “As the Father has

loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love.” What do the forgiveness of our sin and our abiding in Christ have to do with our relationships with each other? What does they mean for the church of Jesus Christ? Here is where we talk about abiding in Christ’s love. How do we abide in Christ’s love? How do we live, dwell, stay, and remain in Christ’s love? By keeping his commandments, just as he kept his Father’s commandments. And what are Christ’s commandments? “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another” (John 13:34 (ESV)). Abide in me, and love one another. It is all a part of the same life. We cannot have one without the other. We cannot abide in Christ without loving each other. We cannot love each other without abiding in Christ. If either one is attractive to you, plan on doing both.

So, the life we share in Christ is not only the foundation for our mutual love, but it is also the mandate, the commandment, for our mutual love. To fail to love each other, to refuse to love each other, to act as if we do not love each other, to hate each other, to hurt and to wrong each other, would be to reject, to forfeit, and to abandon our abiding in Christ. If we do not love each other in the church, we cannot possibly love God, and we are liars if we say that we do. Though we are all individually related to Christ, that is not the end of the matter. Christ instructs, directs, encourages, urges, and, yes, commands us to love one another. And he is not talking about warm, fuzzy feelings. He is talking about actively willing the good for each other, actively seeking what is in each other’s best interest, loving, praying, and caring for each other. That is the basis of who we are and what we are about. “I am the vine; you are the branches”? “Love one another.” “Abide in me, and I in you”? “Love one another.” Bear much fruit, glorify God, prove to be my disciples? “Love one another.” This is the sticking point of the Christian faith. Loving God and his Christ is one thing. Loving each other is quite another. And yet here is the goal, the purpose, the meaning, the direction, the end point of it all: “Love one another.”

So, church is not a take-it-or-leave-it matter for Christians. Church is a community of relationships and connectedness, of mutual forgiveness and, most of all, mutual love, apart from which we deny and forfeit any claim of connectedness with Christ. To be the church involves working together as direct fulfillment of the command of Christ for us to love one another. Here, and here only, do we experience the fullness of joy which Christ intends for us. Let us rejoice in the good news that Christ has already made us clean by his word and that Christ is connected to us in a lively and life-giving relationship. Let us rejoice in, and obey, his commandment to love one another in the same way that he loves us, working together as his faithful church, bearing much fruit, to the glory of God. “These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.”

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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