

Jesus Said: I am the True Vine

John 15:1 – 8

Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church

April 10, 2016

Review: the “I Am” statements of Jesus

Today marks the conclusion of our study of the seven “I Am” statements by Jesus as recorded in John’s gospel. Jesus declared that he is the “Bread of Life,” meaning that it would be by his sacrifice on the cross that he would bring new life for those who belong to him. Jesus is the Light of the World. It is through faith in Christ that we are given true understanding of our world. Jesus tells us that he is the good shepherd and the door. He knows his own, watches out for them, and keeps them safe. Jesus says “I am the resurrection.” It is through him that the hope of eternal life is realized. Last week we looked at his declaration to be “the way, the truth and the life.” Jesus is the way to God. He is the truth of God. And in him is the eternal life God the Father gives to the elect. Today, we hear Jesus declare that he is the Vine.

We will look at that in greater depth shortly. For now, recall that when Jesus uses the formula “I Am,” he is echoing God the Father’s self-declaration to Moses. God speaks to Moses from the Burning Bush. Moses asks, “What shall I call you?” God replies, “I am, who I am.” When Jesus says “I am...the Bread of Life;” “the Light of the World;” “the Door;” “the good Shepherd;” and so on, he is claiming for himself divine identity. In each of these seven assertions, Jesus is claiming divine authority. We see this also in Jesus’ use of the definitive article for each declaration. Jesus is “The Way.” Jesus is “The Resurrection.” Jesus’ authority in each of these areas is complete. He does not share it with

any other.

There is a very practical sense as to why Jesus' affirmation to be The True Vine is the last of the seven "I Am" statements. If Jesus Christ is The True Vine, then what matters for you and me, as his followers, is to remain connected, grafted in, to him.

Jesus Christ is the True Vine

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.

References in the Bible to vineyards are found as early as Noah. In the ancient world, and today, vineyards are of tremendous importance. A grapevine is a luxuriant plant and the climate of the Near East is particularly suited to it. In addition to producing fruit, the leaves of the branches give shade from the hot Middle Eastern sun. The fruit of the vine would be used for grapes, eaten fresh; or dried as raisins; or cooked to a sweet syrup; or, most commonly, crushed and fermented into wine. Wine was often used as a means of exchange, barter.

A vine is planted purposefully. To plant a vineyard required a great deal of work and investment. According to Mosaic law, a man was exempt from having to go to war if he had planted a vineyard but had not yet enjoyed the fruit of it. To create a vineyard required tilling the soil and clearing it of stones—no easy task in Palestine! A wall, called a hedge, would be built around it, to keep critters out. A watch tower would be built and a wine vat cut into the ground. Once the vines were planted more work was required: pruning, thinning, hoeing and watering by irrigation.

The imagery Jesus uses is to say that God the Father is the vine dresser. He is in charge of the vineyard. He is the

one at work creating, tilling, and overseeing the vineyard. God has a purpose in his work. What is God's purpose? It is to produce fruit from the branches of the vines. For this reason, the Father prunes with a purpose. God prunes, he cuts things back, he trains the vine. God is working his purposes out. God is pruning, thinning, hoeing and irrigating in order to produce spiritual fruit that honors and glorifies him.

What did Jesus mean when he says of himself that he is The True Vine? On one level, there is a very simple answer. In the Old Testament there are a number of passages that offer the imagery of the people of Israel, the people of God, being a vine, being God's vine. The problem is that all of the images are negative. Israel is portrayed as a faithless vine. Israel's faithlessness becomes a justification for God's judgment to fall upon the people of Israel. In contrast, when Jesus says he is The True Vine, he is saying that he is the one who remains faithful to God's purpose. Jesus is the true vine in contrast to Israel's failure to be so.

Jesus uses an image in this passage stating that he is the true vine and that those who seek to follow him are the branches of that vine. This is not surprising. Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of all that the Old Covenant promises. He is the True Vine.

Next, and this follows from the fact that Jesus is the true vine. We must be in Christ.

We must be in Christ and bear fruit

²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you....

These verses teach us three things: 1) we are in Christ; 2) God the Father prunes those who are in Christ; and 3) those in Christ are already clean.

Branches are dependent upon the vine. To live and be fruitful the branch must be organically linked to the vine. There is a common idea in our world that it really does not matter what you believe, as long as you believe sincerely; that it does not matter what we are tied into for nourishment, the important thing is that we are tied into something. Balderdash. We are not made that way. It matters to believe rightly. It matters if we should believe wrongly. One must have the right object of faith. There is only one source of life offered to us and that is in Christ. We are not self-sufficient. Our first need and greatest need is to be connected to Christ.

Jesus is the true vine. In saying that Jesus is the true vine, he is not saying that he is the **only** vine. There are many things in this world that we are rightly connected to: our family, community, neighborhood, work, our sense of the past, our ethnic identity, our social networks and our nation, and more. These things are all good and have their place in our lives. And, they find their ultimate and final meaning, purpose and value in relationship to Jesus Christ. He is the true vine. He is the one from whom all the rest of life finds its meaning and orientation.

In other words, those who claim the name of Christ are organically connected to him. The branches are connected to the vine and it is through the vine that the nutrients of life flow. The life of Christ flows from him to his people, to his branches. No man is an island. There are no isolated Christians. If a person is not in Jesus Christ, if they

are not connected to the vine, they are not a Christian and there is no life in them. They are, Jesus says, fit only to be gathered and burned. Jesus is saying that among all the things in this world that we can be connected to, being connected to him is the most important, the most primary, the most central, and the most essential.

Being in Christ is one thing. What does Jesus mean when he tells us that God the Father prunes those who are in Christ? You may be wondering, asking yourself, “Pastor Mark, what did Jesus mean when he says that God is actively at work pruning in my life?” I can give you an example. I know many Christians who have declared out loud statements such as: “God, I’ll do anything you ask, but I won’t be a missionary;” or “God, I will go anywhere you call, but not to South America;” or, “God, I will share my faith with anyone, but not that loud mouth jerk of a boss.” And then what happens? Some weeks, months, or years later, the person finds that he is now on the mission field, living in San Paulo, Brazil; or hosting a weekly Bible study, and one of the participants is his loud mouth boss. What was God doing, if he was not pruning a hard heart, opening a closed mind, or teaching empathy? God prunes us when he takes away wrong attitudes; corrects erroneous beliefs; replaces illicit values; improves dubious convictions; and purges from us that which does not honor and glorify his name.

Jesus Christ is the true vine. We must be in Christ the true vine and being in Christ, God the Father prunes us. Next, Jesus tells us that we must remain in Christ, the true vine.

We must remain in Christ

⁴Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide

in me.

In today's world we talk about being "wired;" connected to the electronic world around us. At this moment, many of you listening to this message during worship are connected to Fairview's wireless network. As the poet John Donne eloquently put it, "no man is an island." We are connected to our world through a myriad of relationships. Our immediate family is the most significant and influential of these forces, but there are many others as well. There are our friendships, obviously. In our occupation there are standards of excellence and professionalism that define how we should act. Religious faith is a significant force upon us. Our national, ethnic, or class identity may impose expectations upon us. We may be a member of a volunteer group with other like-minded people where shared history, hobbies, or leisure activities establish standards of behavior. We may adopt a philosophy, consciously or unconsciously, that guides our choices, for better or for ill. The things we are connected to shape and influence us.

The key point is to remain in Christ. It is not enough to start off well. We must finish well. Jesus' words to his disciples and us are meant as an encouragement: "You are already clean." Redemption and salvation is ours already. We do not have to earn it. At the same time, giving our lives to Christ is a lifelong commitment. It is not enough that *at one time* you went forward at an evangelistic rally. It is not enough that at one time you prayed *a sinner's prayer*. It is not enough that you were raised in a Christian home, or that at one time you were baptized, confirmed or joined the Church.

A person can cease to abide or remain in Christ. Did you know that as a young man Karl Marx was a follower of

Jesus? Or that the great church musician, Ralph Vaughn Williams, began well, but grew bitter and cynical over his life? The English author, playwright, Oscar Wilde, was a very gifted man who ultimately made a mess of his life. Living in poverty and exile, reflecting on his life, Wilde wrote that, "I forgot that every little action of the common day makes or unmakes character."

Losing one's faith is a serious matter. I am continually amazed at how many in our modern world fall away from the faith. They do not complete the race. They wander off to other commitments and embrace other values. I ask people all the time if they are involved in the Christian faith or are members of a church. The most common response I hear is "well, I used to be, but I am not very active anymore." Faith in Christ's redemptive work evolves into vague sentiment that all God wants from them is to do good, be kind, and act morally. Religious faith is reduced to merely being upright and ethical. They re-imagine their faith as something that has no clear connection to Jesus; it is about them: "I'm a good person" they piously declare, believing that that is all that God expects or requires.

God brings to worship those whom he wills. He also leads away those who have no part of him. He removes unfruitful branches. He separates off those who have no true connection to Jesus Christ. There is a fatal consequence that accompanies a failure to abide. Those who wander off were never truly a part of Christ to begin with. John Wesley returned from a preaching tour in Ireland and his brother Charles asked him if many souls were added to the church. "No," John Wesley replied, "but there were several blessed subtractions."

Jesus Christ is the true vine. We must be in Christ the true vine. Jesus tells us that we must remain in him, the

true vine. And, related to this, Christ must abide in us.

Christ must abide in us

⁵I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

We are to abide in Christ. And Christ abides in us.

As a Christian believer, every day you fight the battle: the battle for your time: the battle for your heart: and the battle for your mind. The tactical decisions we make each day will leave us stronger or weaker in our walk with Christ. We can wander away, and not even be aware that we are doing so. The key thing, the decisive thing, is to remain close to Christ and to his word.

You may recall that, when he was running for president the first time, Jimmy Carter gave a famous interview in which he admitted that there was a sense in which he was guilty of adultery, for he knew the reality of lust in his own heart. Do you remember that? Carter was the man who put the word *evangelical* on the political map. When Jimmy Carter made that statement, he was thinking of Jesus' words (Matthew 5:27). ²⁷“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall not commit adultery.’ ²⁸But I say to you that everyone who looks at a woman with lustful intent has already committed adultery with her in his heart. In this regard, while his words were surprising, Carter's words were true. They reflected his abiding in Christ.

Recently, Jimmy Carter made news again, this time saying "*I think Jesus would encourage any love affair if it was honest and sincere and was not damaging to anyone else, and I don't see that gay marriage damages anyone*

else." Carter went on to say further, "I believe Jesus would approve gay marriage," he said. "That's just my own personal opinion." Carter admits that his sentiment is his own opinion, not that of Christ. When Carter made his famous statement about "committing adultery in his heart" he could point specifically to the words of Jesus. Now, when he speaks approvingly of "gay-marriage" he does not cite a Bible text. Indeed, he cannot, for there is no such text. Contrary to Jimmy Carter's *opinion*, in the gospels Jesus repeatedly affirms the biblical tradition regarding God's establishment of marriage. In Matthew 19: we read, ⁴He [Jesus] answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, ⁵and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? ⁶So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."

Jesus Christ is the true vine. We must be in Christ the true vine. We must remain in Christ, the true vine. And Christ must abide in us. Lastly, those who are in and abide in Christ will yield fruit that glorifies God.

We will yield fruit that glorifies God

⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Galatians 5:22

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.

In the summertime, when we lived in Bay Village, Ohio, the Atkinson family would often take walks in the neighborhood. I recall that there was one home, on a double lot, that had a striking garden visible from the sidewalk. I

never met the owner of the home, but I can tell you that the gardener was glorified by the garden. It was an impressive sight. The glory of the gardener was revealed in the beauty of the garden. It was pleasing to the eye, an enjoyable place to simply stop and look.

I mention this because I think that in the modern church we are often mistaken in our understanding of the nature of the fruit God wishes to produce in and through us. I recall one evening, also when we lived in Bay Village, when our son, Benjamin, was in pre-school. We were walking along and Benjamin spotted an ice cream cone wrapper someone had carelessly discarded. Benjamin bent down, picked it up, and turned to me and Lois Ann and declared, "I am saving the planet."

We moderns are into superlatives. We do not pick up trash. We save the planet. We moderns want *to change lives, to do something great, make an impact, and to change the world*. We are not content to cultivate character, to remain faithful and true to our family commitments, and to simply lead ordinary, honorable and upright lives.

Jesus tells us that he wishes for us, his people, to bear fruit. What does he mean? Well, it happens that in another place in holy scripture we are told explicitly what constitutes the fruit of the Holy Spirit. Jesus wants you and me to bear fruit. What does he wish to cultivate within our lives? The scriptures do not leave any doubt. What is the nature of the fruit that Jesus Christ seeks to produce through this people, his elect? What does the fruit Jesus produces look like? Paul tells us, in Galatians 5:22, what the fruit of the Spirit consists of: the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. These are the fruit God intends to produce in the

lives of those who are his, who belong to him and are called by his name. The fruit of the Spirit is the ability to love, sacrificially, as God loves. It is joy, the ability to rejoice and express gratitude to God even in the midst of adverse circumstances. It is peace, the ability to look benignly upon an uncertain future. It is patience, the willingness to endure both trying circumstances and trying people. It is kindness, offering to others sympathy. It is goodness, the conviction and knowledge of what is right and proper. The fruit of the Spirit is to be faithful, loyal and consistent to those whom God has placed in our lives. It is gentle, willing to accept and work around the weaknesses of others. It is self-control, recognizing that all human government begins with self-government.

How is it that these fruits are cultivated, made real in our lives? Where does that nourishment that encourages these fruits come from? Jesus tells us: it is through abiding in him and through the ministry of his word. The end result is that by being in Christ, abiding in Christ and remaining in Christ, we will glorify God by bearing the fruit of the Spirit.

Close

We prove that we are Christ's disciples by bearing fruit. When love, joy, peace, patience and the rest are evident in our lives they are a sign that Christ is at work in our hearts and minds. Bearing fruit is not an accomplishment. In being attached to Christ his work flows naturally through us. We bear this fruit organically, as you would expect. The fruit of the Spirit is like the music a violinist produces: it flows naturally from the violin at the hands of the musician.

So let me ask you, "Is the life of Christ flowing out of

you this day?” Is there evidence in your life that you have been born again by the power of God’s Spirit and united with Jesus Christ the true vine? Do you see the fruit of the spirit being produced in your life? Is God honored by your good deeds? Is there growing in your life a Christian temperament, one marked by love for God and love for others? Are you growing in spiritual understanding? Are you deepening your grasp of Biblical truth? Remember, Jesus tells us that it is by his word that we find cleansing. Is your hold on Christian doctrine stronger today than it was last year? Is your desire to please God deeper?

Every Christian is united with Jesus Christ. He is the vine. We are the branches. We have an obligation, a need, to remain in communion and fellowship with Jesus. In Jesus Christ is our righteousness. In Jesus Christ is the spiritual strength and nourishment we need. It is through our union with Christ that we are enabled to produce the spiritual fruit that honors God.

Say 'Amen,' Somebody

John 15:1 – 11

I Am the True Vine

15 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ²Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you

can do nothing. ⁶If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. ¹⁰If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. ¹¹These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, ²³ gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.