

"Remain"
John 15:1-17
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'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. ⁹As the Father has loved me, so I have 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. ¹¹I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

¹² 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. ¹³No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴You are my friends if you do what I command you. ¹⁵I do not call you servants any longer, because the servant does not know what the master is doing; but I have called you friends, because I have made known to you everything that I have heard from my Father. ¹⁶You 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. ¹⁷I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another.

The word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Bible is full of agricultural imagery. Apples, figs, dates, olives, grain, grapes. All the things that grow in the Fertile Crescent of Middle East are used not only in the recounting of stories, but also to communicate important truths. And Jesus uses these images in the most powerful way of all. A mustard seed is akin to faith. A fig tree the communicator of blessing. Seeds sown by a farmer likened to the word of God let loose in the world. And grapes on the vine become a comforting, challenging and lasting metaphor on the night before Jesus died. The

text before us today, while six chapters before the end of John's gospel, occurs mere moments before Jesus' arrest, a few hours before his trial, less than a day before his death. He shares these words for the first time with his disciples. The beloved ones that he has called to be his own and taught to show his love and empowered to share his truths.

I have loved this passage for as long as I can remember. I think it can be traced back to my high school Sunday School days at First Presbyterian Church of Anderson. One year we read a book called "Secrets of the Vine" that changed my life. When I look back at it now, I realize that it wasn't the most eloquent book. It wasn't written by the most learned scholar or dynamic preacher. But it made Jesus' words from John 15 real and relevant to me. An excerpt goes like this –

"Eleven dejected men follow Jesus down the stairs and out into the cool night air. Some of the disciples carry lamps or burning torches to light the way...The disciples follow Jesus down the hill, through the winding streets of Jerusalem. Avoiding the temple mount and its noisy, celebrating crowds, Jesus turns right and leads them out of the city.

Then they turn sharply left to follow the Kidron Valley up toward their destination. Along the terraces that follow the curve of the valley, they pass through ancient vineyards. They walk in single file between the rows of neatly tended grapes, plants that have been bearing fruit for generations. To the left above them tower the city walls and the ramparts of the temple. Ahead and to the right rises the Mount of Olives, where Gethsemane and betrayal await. Here Jesus stops. Hemmed in by rows of vines, the disciples gather around. Lamps and torches sputter in the night air and flicker in their eyes. Jesus reaches for a grape branch. Showing signs of new spring growth, its woody stem lies across his hand in the golden light. Now he begins. 'I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser.'"¹

My friend and former colleague, Peter Bynum, once told a story about a vine that stuck with me and has melded itself into my understanding of this passage. His grandparents lived in rural Iron Station, North Carolina, in Gaston County. And when Peter was young and they would go

¹ Bruce Wilkinson, "Secrets of the Vine."

visit, all the way there, all he could think about was the muscadine vine out back. He loved that sweet fruit, even if you did have to spit the seeds out to get to the delicious pulp. That vine was huge – 12 to 15 feet in length, five to six feet wide, and it covered a metal frame in the backyard, right next to the garden. To his childhood self, it represented goodness, joy, life. As an adult, Peter longs for that vine. He wishes he could have just one more piece of fruit from it. He wishes that land was still in his family. He wishes he had at least tried to transplant that vine to his own yard.

Over the years I've enjoyed a wide variety of grapes. And even Muscadines – multiple kinds. And I've savored delicious wine over the course of a rich meal. But I've never held a grapevine in my hands. I've never lifted one off the ground, or checked it for new growth, or tended to its health with pruning shears. I've been strawberry picking and blueberry picking and I've plucked ripe figs from my own grandmother's tree. I've had a lesson on grafting in a pecan grove, I've hiked through olive groves and scampered up apple trees in search of the ripest fruit, but I've never been grape picking. I've never even mashed grapes in a bucket, Lucy and Ethel style, with my feet. So Peter's image of this vine that meant so much to his family and to his own childhood identity has now come to mean something to me.

Because it helps me understand the delicate nature of a vine. But also its strength, its longevity, its power.

The translation of scripture I use most often, and the one we use in our pews here at Westminster – the NRSV – translates the Greek word “meinate” in this passage as “abide”. And I've always cherished that use of language – “Abide in me as I abide in you.” But in my preparation for this sermon, I came across an alternate translation of that word that has changed this passage's meaning for me a bit. REMAIN.

Remain in me as I remain in you. Those who remain in me and I in them bear much fruit. You will remain in my love just as I remain in my father's love.

Remain. Of course. Of course, that what Jesus' disciples needed to hear as he made his way from the Upper Room to the Garden of Gethsemane to the house of the high priest to Pilate's headquarters to Golgotha and the cross. Remain.

So, I've been praying that over the past few weeks. Lord, help me to remain in you. As I navigate this pastoral situation. As I step into this elementary stage of parenting. As I clarify my values. As I exist in a changing family system with semi-retired parents and adult siblings scattered across states and countries.

And I've been praying it for you and others in my circle. Lord, help her to remain strong in you through this battle with cancer. Lord, help them to remain in you, to find their worth in your eyes, as they navigate college applications and first heart breaks. Lord, help them to remain in you, to trust that you give life, as they face infertility.

Lord, help them to remain in you, to find their peace in you, as they fight for their marriage. Lord, help them remain in you, to rely on your ways of being in the world, as they leave their marriage.

If you look deeply at this passage, you can see a formula emerge. It is simple, but it isn't easy. It makes sense to the heart, but maybe not the head at times. Keeping Christ's commandments (commandments like care for the least of these and resistance to greed and offering hospitality to strangers) leads to abiding, or remaining, in Christ. Which leads to bearing fruit, which manifests in a posture of love. Love that is great. Love that models itself after the greatest of all. One that lays down its life for its companions. One that is rooted in servanthood but crowned in friendship.

Jesus' words in this chapter are for a specific type of disciple. The mature one. The invested one. The stick-around kind. The one who doesn't want to be a one season fruit bearer. The one who wants to bear fruit like love, joy, and peace. Patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness. Gentleness and self-control. The one who wants to share that fruit with others and support others in bearing good fruit, too. The one who is willing to be pruned. And who is willing to let Jesus take away those branches within them that don't bear fruit...to take them away as the Lamb of God does the sins of the world on the cross. The one who has total dependence on Jesus.

Over the course of the past few weeks, as I've been thinking about what it looks like to remain in Christ, to totally depend on Jesus, I realized that I've seen it in action. And I've seen it in

many ways, but one of the most tangible ways was this summer when I took a group of our youth to Cuba. We had one person in our group who dealt with a lot of fear and anxiety leading up to the trip. We were traveling to a new place with new people and a new culture. Plus, leaving family and friends behind for a full week when you're 16 years old isn't easy. I knew how this youth felt going into the trip. I knew how she felt that first night after we arrived. I could see the uncertainty on her face. I could hear it in her voice. And I saw it that first night as she went to bed with tears in her eyes. But over the course of our time in Cuba, what I began to see was not fear and anxiety. It was joy. It was adventure. It was openness and fun. She had learned to depend on Jesus and the fruit she bore and continues to bear from that experience is abundant and beautiful.

She had to let herself be tended and pruned...she had to let the Father take away her fear. And she had to remain, with all her might, in the vine and to trust in Christ's strength and nourishment.

Friends, we are the lucky ones. We weren't there on that last night. We didn't answer that initial call and drop our nets. We didn't see him suffer and die. But we are invited in and these words can be for us. They are true and they are life-giving. The farmer isn't just any old farmer. He's the best, the most experienced, the most patient, the most wise...the gold award winner. He's our Heavenly Father...the one Jesus called "Abba". And the vine isn't just a regular old vine. It's the oldest and most prolific vine of all time, with a rich and well-known history of success.

It doesn't just fill a backyard in rural North Carolina, it wraps around the world. It is everlasting. This vine is our brother. Our friend. Our Savior and our Lord.

Remain. Remain to grow into maturity. Remain and trust to reach new levels of fruit bearing. Remain and see life brought out of death. Amen and amen.