

True Vine

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John 15:1-11

Sermon Series:
God's Big Story

***“I 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.”***

- John 15:2-5

This morning, we continue to enjoy our study of God's Big Story and the ways our personal life stories are a part of God's Big Story as we look at the wonderful fifteenth chapter of the Gospel of John. As Pastor Pete explained last week, these words of Jesus are part of his last lecture, his farewell discourse, that took place in the Upper Room before his crucifixion and resurrection. Jesus begins by saying, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower" (15:1).

Grapevines are a marvelous plant. A friend of mine became so enamored with grapevines he dug up his whole backyard to plant them, and I just received an email from his wife saying he is in the process of buying one acre of land to expand his vineyard. Where this is all going will be entertaining to follow. In the Old Testament, the grapevine was the symbol of the nation of Israel. For example, the prophet Hosea wrote, "Israel is a luxuriant vine that yields its fruit" (10:1). However, interestingly all of the many passages in the Old Testament that refer to Israel of that day as the vine speak of Israel as faithless to its Lord. So Hosea speaks of the luxuriant vine that was Israel, and in his very next sentence, he says of them, "Their heart is false; now they must bear their guilt." Jeremiah wrote to

Israel, "Yet I planted you as a choice vine, from the purest stock. How then did you turn degenerate and become a wild vine?" (2:21).

It is in contrast to that imagery of the false vine that, in John 15:1, Jesus said, "I am the true vine, and my Father [that is God] is the vine grower." Then Jesus goes on to say some very direct things to us. He makes the assumption that our hearts' desire is not to be like the faithless and fruitless Israel of that day but that we want to be connected to Jesus and bear his fruit. So he says, "He [my Father] removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide 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. I 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" (John 15:2-5). Connection with the true vine, Jesus, is key to a fruitful life.

One beautiful spring day when our son Lee was eight years old, he ran up to me and said, "Dad, guess what? There's a pond behind Cumberland Elementary School and there are tadpoles. Dad, could we go catch some and bring them home?"

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Well, that sounded like great adventure. We went into the garage and found an old coffee can and a long-handled minnow dip net. We climbed onto our bicycles and went down the street and down around behind Cumberland School. There in the middle of a massive construction project was a giant mud puddle about six inches deep and ten yards across.

The bottom of the mud puddle was black, covered with a hundred zillion little black tadpoles. Our eyes lit up. We'd found gold. We jumped off our bikes and with the first scoop with our minnow net caught at least fifty tadpoles. Now, four or five tadpoles would probably have been sufficient for our purposes but, seeing there were a hundred zillion left, we took the coffee can and dumped all fifty in, put the plastic top on and bicycled home. We filled an old plastic kitty litter pan half full of water, put in a piece of wood so that the little froggies could have a place to sit and we fed them fish food every day. We did not know what else to feed them so that had to do.

Well, life in our little tadpole farm went fine for about three months; although after three months they hadn't grown at all. They were still itty-bitty little tadpoles about half-an-inch long. One day Lee said, "Dad, let's go back to the mud puddle and see what's happening to the tadpoles that we didn't catch." "That sounds like a good idea." We jumped on our bicycles, went back down to the mud puddle and to our

surprise as we stepped off the bikes, we saw tadpoles were gone. The bottom of the pond was no longer black but just the color of mud. I wondered if some disease had killed them or birds ate them. Suddenly, I noticed a little movement by my foot. I looked down and there was an itty-bitty frog. Then, as we began to look under the leaves and the grass and the brush, why there were a hundred zillion itty-bitty frogs. They'd all grown up. I was astonished. I thought, "Well, the brothers and sisters of these frogs that we caught and had at home haven't grown at all and these are fully mature frogs."

What was the difference? Very simple. The frogs in that pond were abiding in the right place for a tadpole to grow up but obviously, for whatever reason, the water, the fish food, something about the place we had them was not right for a tadpole to abide and to grow. In fact, I didn't know what tadpoles ate until, years later, I learned they'll eat lettuce that has been frozen or boiled (in case you ever want to raise tadpoles). Clearly, in order to grow up, those tadpoles needed the correct nourishment. It is so easy for us to be driven by busyness, to be exhausted, depleted and depressed. We can find ourselves abiding everywhere but the place that leads to personal refreshment, spiritual growth and fruit. We want to bear fruit and to be connected to the Jesus Vine, tied to Jesus Christ, himself. Jesus said, "I 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" (John 15:5).

The key to being fruitful is abiding in Jesus and the key to abiding is believing.

As a matter of fact, Jesus pushes this idea of “apart from me you can do nothing” even further. “Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (John 15:6-7). I remember the first grapevine I ever saw was the grape arbor of Ann Marie’s grandfather. If you looked closely at the vines, you saw two kinds of branches. One kind of branch had many leaves but no grapes, no fruit. The other kind of branch was loaded with fruit. Jesus’ word is direct. The branch that bears no fruit will be cut off. The branch that bears fruit will be cut back, pruned, so that it will bear more fruit. What is the key to bearing fruit? Jesus said, “Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me” (John 15:4). The key to fruitfulness is abiding and, specifically, abiding in Jesus.

In this paragraph in John’s gospel, the verb “abide” occurs ten times in eleven verses. Abiding is the key to connection with Jesus and to bearing fruit in your life. So, what, exactly, does abiding mean? The New International Version of the Bible uses the word “remain”. “If you remain in me and I remain in you.” The word “abide” always leads me to think of the King James Version of the Christmas story in Luke chapter 2: “And there were shepherds abiding

in their fields keeping watch over their flocks by night.” What does it mean to abide in the fields? It means to live there, continue there, remain there. “Abide” means literally to go somewhere and to stay there. To abide in Jesus is to move into Jesus and stay there.

If the apostle John tells us ten times in eleven verses to abide in Jesus, he also tells us nearly one hundred times in his whole gospel to believe in Jesus. The key to being fruitful is abiding in Jesus and the key to abiding is believing. “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life” (John 3:16). Want to abide in Jesus, be connected to the Jesus vine? Believe in Jesus.

So dozens of times we read in our English Bibles that John tells us to believe in Jesus. Here is an interesting thing. John wrote the gospel of John in the Greek language, and wherever we read in English “in” – believe in Jesus – John used the preposition “into” – believe into Jesus. The preposition “in” gives the sense of location. We are “in” this sanctuary. The proposition “into” offers the sense of movement. We walked “into” this sanctuary.

When we speak of believing “in” something today, it often means just a mental agreement that something exists. Take this chair. I believe in the existence of this chair. Is there anyone here who doesn’t? If so let me know and I’ll connect you with a counselor or an optometrist! Now when John says “believe into,” he uses the concept of believing the

To abide in Jesus, to stay connected to the Jesus vine, believe into Jesus, hand yourself, your life, your future into his arms.

way the Bible uses it. So if I believe “into” this chair, it means I sit in it, I entrust myself to it to hold me up, I hand myself over to it.

So to believe into Jesus is to both affirm that I believe Jesus exists and it is to hand myself over to Jesus. For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes into him may not perish but may have eternal life. Not just believe in, but believe into. To abide in Jesus, to stay connected to the Jesus vine, believe into Jesus, hand yourself, your life, your future into his arms.

Jesus loved object lessons. After the resurrection, he uses Thomas as that object lesson. Thomas, who doubted Jesus had been raised from the dead. So Jesus appears to the disciples and says to Thomas, "Put your finger here; see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it into my side. Stop doubting and believe." [He told Thomas to move into him. A vivid picture of believing into Jesus.] Thomas said to him, "My Lord and my God!" (John 20:27-28). So Thomas learned to believe into Jesus, to entrust himself to Jesus and to abide into the Jesus vine. In the same way, you abide into the Jesus vine as you believe into him, as you reach out and touch Jesus by faith.

A couple of weeks ago, I received an interesting email from a person I don't know, who lives in Atlanta. He said, "While back-sliding this Sunday morning, I decided to Google my father-in-law's name. When I did, I came

upon a sermon you preached at National Presbyterian last year. My father-in-law was Harry Fifield." He had my attention! The story he refers to is one I told here a couple of years ago. Harry was the pastor at the First Presbyterian Church in Atlanta when I was a college student. He had a great impact on me. He told the story of the woman who had bled for twelve years and who worked her way through a pushing, shoving crowd of people around Jesus in order to touch Jesus, and who was instantly healed by the power of God. Jesus wanted to know who touched him, and the woman fell at his feet and heard him say, "Daughter, your faith has healed you. Go in peace and be freed from your suffering" (Mark 5:34). Then Harry Fifield asked us, "Are you crowding Jesus or touching him?" Are you in the crowds Sunday morning just bumping into people and saying hello or are you touching Jesus? That's abiding! Abiding in Jesus is touching Jesus by faith. It's believing into Jesus by affirming that Jesus is alive and entrusting yourself to Jesus.

So, the key to staying connected to the Jesus Vine is abiding in Jesus, is believing into Jesus, by "touching Jesus," by entrusting yourself to Jesus as you learn about Jesus and love Jesus and lean on Jesus. The words of Jesus continue, "My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments

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and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you” (John 15:8-12).

If the key to abiding in Jesus is believing, the evidence of the fruit from the Jesus Vine that proves you are abiding in Jesus comes by obeying Jesus, “If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love” (John 15:10). Abiding means believing into Jesus leads to obeying Jesus. There is nothing mystical about this. It is a matter of doing what God asks you to do. Broadly, we know that involves all of the commandments of God, such as the Ten Commandments—do not have other gods, do not lie, do not steal, do not commit adultery, do honor your parents, do keep the Sabbath, and so on. Jesus rather neatly summarized all of the commands of God by saying, If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love....This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. The idea is so basic. Treating people as Jesus treated people is evidence that we are connected to the Jesus Vine, it is the fruit of the vine and its result in our lives is joy. Ask yourself this question: “What is the consequence of my life?” Is the result of your life the movement of God’s love through you into the lives of the people around you? Loving people is the evidence that we are connected to the Jesus Vine. That’s the fruit Jesus is looking for.

Charles Stanley, pastor of the First Baptist Church of Atlanta, tells of a time in his life when he was really struggling. There were a lot of problems in his life and, in the midst of this turmoil, an elderly member of his church invited Charles Stanley to her apartment for lunch. Stanley hesitated. It was a busy time, and he was reluctant to go. He didn't know if she was going to preach him a sermon or what. She could tell he was hesitant and said, "Son you need to come." Finally, he agreed to go to her apartment complex for lunch.

He met her downstairs at the retirement community where she lived. They had lunch there and then rode the elevator to her apartment. Entering the apartment she said, "Now son, I don't want you to sit down. I want to show you something." She took him to a place in her living room. There she had a picture of Daniel in the lion's den hanging up on the wall. She said, "Son, I just want you to look at this picture and tell me what you see." Charles Stanley looked at the picture and saw that all the lions had their mouths closed and some of them were lying down there. Daniel was standing with his hands behind him looking up at this red light coming into the prison. "So, what do you see?" she repeated. Stanley told her everything he could see in the painting. He told her all about Daniel and the lions and the bones and the stones. She asked, "Anything else, son?" He said, "No, ma'am, that's it." She put her arm around him and said, "Son, what I want you to see is, Daniel doesn't

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have his eyes on the lions, but on Christ."

Whether your life feels like you are among the lions or relaxing with the lambs, Jesus says abide in me as I abide in you. These things I have spoken to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be full. Touching Jesus, believing into and obeying Jesus, keeping your eyes on Jesus are all ways of saying that when you are abiding in Jesus, when you are connected to the true vine, then fruit and joy will be found in you. Open your heart to Jesus. Abide in him. Let Jesus love the people in your life through you.

The whole sermon is:

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