

+ John 15:1-8 + Will You Remain in Me? + 5th Sunday of Easter + 10 May 2009 +

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.” Do Jesus’ words make you feel a little uncomfortable? When he says, ***“Apart from me you can do nothing”***, does that make you squirm a little inside?

Did it make his disciples feel a little uncomfortable on that night Jesus was betrayed—an act which would happen only a couple hours later? Just moments before Christ had concluded what we know as his Upper Room Discourse—some final teaching before they departed from the Upper Room. Filled with the smells and tastes and textures of the Passover meal, it was now time for Jesus and his disciples to get ready to head out to the Garden of Gethsemane. Right before they left, however, Jesus paused to teach one more lesson, to offer one more word of encouragement. ***“Remain in me, and I will remain in you.”***

Surely Jesus’ words made them feel uncomfortable because he had already talked of how they wouldn’t remain in him. That night his disciples had heard about betrayal and suffering and sacrifice and death. Oh, they had loudly promised to never leave his side and even die with him, but still Jesus urged his disciples, ***“Remain in me, and I will remain in you.”***

It probably made them feel a little uneasy, because he knew something they feared to consider. They knew Jesus was the all-knowing God, after all. He knew what they were going to do, even if they didn’t. Jesus knew that even as they tied their sandals on their feet, in just a couple hours those same sandaled feet would flee in every direction away from him. A mob led by one of their own would meet them in the Garden to arrest Jesus, but every single disciple would abandon the Lord in his hour of need. ***“Remain in me, and I will remain in you.”***

To teach this lesson, Jesus used the familiar picture of a grapevine and its branches. Vineyards were as commonplace in Palestine as they are around the Finger Lakes. Wine could be found on the dinner table of every Jewish family, but Jesus had a more important reason to use this picture than to simply calm their nerves with a familiar picture from home.

You see, a grapevine and its branches, big and small, are intimately connected. They are so closely connected that you can’t really tell where the vine ends and the branches begin. Life and nourishment flow directly from the vine to its branches and cause each branch to bear fruit. If a branch were to be separated from the vine in any way, however, that branch would eventually wither and die. It would eventually become kindling for a fire. Connection to the vine, then, is vital for the life of a branch.

So, too, is the connection between Christ the true Vine and his branches—those who follow him by faith. What other picture could better reflect how intimate that connection is? Jesus explains, ***“Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.”***

Such a beautiful picture, but did you notice some statements in there that maybe leave you a little uncomfortable? I know they trouble me. Jesus tells us to ***“remain in me”***. What does that mean? We often hear these words and think, “Well, Lord, I will...if I can”. How quickly our sinful selves key in on that command of Jesus to ***“Remain in me...”*** and forget that that’s only possible because Christ remains in us through the faith connection he established through his Word. We forget that he says, ***“Apart from me you can do nothing”***, and start to think it’s all about our effort, what we do for Jesus. Do you hear those words and perhaps pat yourself on the back a little because you’ve worked hard to remain in Jesus all these years? Or do you hear those words and kick yourself a little because your life hasn’t been as Christian as you would like? Don’t give yourself so much credit. Remember who first heard these words from Jesus—the Eleven who had personally followed Jesus and heard all his teaching. They couldn’t follow this command for three hours, let alone one day or a lifetime.

So these words make me uncomfortable, because by nature, I think I have to do something to appease God’s anger, to bargain with him, but that’s not how God operates. Our gracious God in heaven acts more like a grapevine that gives all its nourishment and life to its branches for free, no strings attached. God mercifully gives away everything—forgiveness and peace and eternal life—no strings attached, but that all seems too easy. Those promises of his grace in his Word seem too simplistic. God can’t surely be that gracious! So you

and I go off and do our own thing, which only ends up cutting us off from the vine. We get disconnected from God's Word, and when problems arise, we look for help everywhere, but the Word to fix our families, our marriages, our careers, our lives, but the search only leaves us feeling emptier as our connection with Christ disintegrates the longer we are away from his Word. We become like branches that have been cut. No matter how vigorous and green and fruitful a branch might appear, once it's cut, it will slowly wither. The lack of nourishment from the vine will eventually cause the once flexible branch to harden and its leaves to turn brown and crispy. Finally the time will come when the branch will die and become nothing more than kindling for the fire. So too, with those who are not connected with Christ, the true Vine and his Word. Separated from Christ and his Word, no matter how pious we might seem, we will eventually die eternally. In essence, separated from Christ, we will become kindling for the fires of hell.

Jesus' words make us uncomfortable, but why did he say these words at that moment on that night? He wasn't trying to push his disciples or us into the depths of despair or the empty void of self-confidence. At a time when he knew his disciples would abandon him physically, Jesus still encouraged them to remain connected to him spiritually. Jesus spoke these uncomfortable words to point his disciples to the true source of comfort.

You see, even though they wouldn't remain in him, Jesus remained for them. He didn't flee into the night. He didn't try to fight off the mob. No, he willingly allowed himself to be betrayed and arrested and ridiculed and beaten and flogged and crucified and killed for them, so they could remain in him. Jesus knew all of this was going to take place, yet there he remained for them—something they wouldn't realize until he spoke to them on Easter night.

Recall what we heard just two weeks ago when we joined the disciples behind the locked doors of the Upper Room. They were troubled with fear and wracked with guilt because they did not remain with Jesus, but still the risen Jesus appeared to them and poured out his grace, his peace, his forgiveness—not through some grand display of power, but through his Word, through the recounting of all he had endured for their forgiveness.

On the night Jesus was betrayed he pointed them to that which connected those branches so intimately to the Vine—his words. Even though in a few short hours, they would see him no longer, through his Word, they would see him long after he had risen. The same is true for you and me. In Christ alone we're forgiven for those times when we've attempted to separate ourselves from the Vine. In Christ alone we receive strength to deal with the cutting difficulties of this life. In Christ alone we receive the glory of Easter—the reality that we're not dead. We're not kindling. In Christ alone we have life.

In Christ, the true Vine, we receive the precious, priceless grace of God. All that makes your fruits of faith seem meager or imperfect is covered with Christ's holiness as the Lord said through his prophet Jeremiah, ***"For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."*** Christ, the true Vine, was cut off so we might live. Now by God's grace, your life that might seem worthless in the eyes of the world is given infinite value, is precious and priceless in the sight of God. Through Christ, God gives everything away to us out of his mercy and grace.

That grace then causes us to bear fruit. Jesus promises, ***"If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit..."*** In God's grace, even the slightest act of love for a little one is seen as good fruit in God's sight. All the money in the world in the hands of one separated from Christ can't buy one single good fruit before God, but one who is connected to Christ through faith in his Word will bear abundant fruit. Yes, compared to the world, the fruit we bear might seem imperfect and meager, but in Christ, the true Vine, that fruit is holy and blessed in his sight.

A wise, old pastor once described that fruit as ***"a life that delights to receive all its strength from the vine."*** When we remain in Christ, the true Vine, through faith in him, God gives us everything. The energy and strength and life flows directly from the vine to the branches so we bear rich and abundant fruit in this life. Now we bear much good fruit through lives closely connected with Christ through his Word—the lives we live with our families, at work, at school, here at church, in the community all in service to our gracious God, who so graciously did not throw us away to become the kindling of hell, but branches in the vineyard of heaven.

Find the comfort, then, in the uncomfortable words of Christ. Rejoice that you are not the vine, but branches intimately connected with Christ, the true Vine. Will you remain in him? By God's grace through faith in the true Vine, you will remain and live and thrive to his Father's glory, strengthened by his power, encouraged by his care and tended by his heavenly Father. Will he remain in you? Count on his promises paid for in blood and sealed with an empty tomb. ***"I will remain in you."*** Amen.