

ABIDE IN JESUS

John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 2, 2021

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

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The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 8. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches his disciples where to be. Please stand as you are able for the Gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹“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.”

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Dear branches,

Abide in Jesus.

What does this mean?

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. In order for us to live and bear fruit, we must abide in the vine. Jesus is our source of life. Both now and into eternity, Jesus is our source of life. For this reason, we must abide in Jesus.

“Abide” is a word that we might not use very often. But in this passage Jesus uses it seven times. So we should probably figure out what it means. Some translations substitute the word “remain.” That’s a more common word, and it captures part of the idea. So it’s easier to understand, and that’s good. Remain in Jesus, just as Jesus remains in you. But the meaning of “abide” is a bit fuller. It also means to “dwell” or “live.” But even those words don’t quite capture the fullness of the idea. There’s an intimacy to abiding in Jesus. Abiding is not just being in a certain place. It’s being and remaining in Jesus, and it’s Jesus being and remaining in us. So it’s not just that we hang around and not leave the faith. You can be present in a certain place without really being engaged or appreciating the blessings of that place, kind of like a disinterested teenager remaining in their parents’ house until they turn eighteen. That’s remaining, but it’s not really abiding. Abiding is fuller. There’s an engagement and intimacy to it. It means that you participate in the activity of that place, and you enjoy all the benefits of the place. Abiding doesn’t simply mean that your body is present in a place; it means your heart is in it too. At least, that’s the kind of abiding Jesus is talking about.

This passage bears a number of similarities to last week's Gospel lesson, and I want to note them. Last week we heard Jesus say, **"I am the Good Shepherd"** (10:11). Then he expounded on this relationship between the shepherd and the sheep. Here Jesus says, **"I am the true vine"** (15:1). Then he expounds on the relationship between the vine and the branches.

And like we did last week, I first want to look at what Jesus says about himself, and then we will consider the imagery of the vine and the branches. In verse 1, Jesus says, **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser."** We might not immediately notice it, but there are three bold claims Jesus makes about himself in this one verse.

First, he claims to be the one true God. Just like he did in the Good Shepherd discourse, Jesus says, **"I am"** (Ἐγώ εἰμι), in a very distinct way that recalls the Old Testament name Yahweh. John actually records seven different instances Jesus saying, **"I am."** Yahweh is the Hebrew name that God revealed himself by in the Old Testament. And it means, "I am." It's usually translated by the title "LORD," in the Old Testament. Anytime you see the title "LORD" in all capital letters that indicates that the personal name for God, Yahweh, is the Hebrew word behind the translation. Here in John 15, it doesn't come through very clearly in English, but Jesus says, **"I am,"** in a distinct way that identifies himself as the one true God who spoke and acted in the Old Testament.

The second bold claim is related to the first. And this one you can actually notice in English if you're reading carefully. Jesus also claims to be the Son of God when he says, **"My Father is the vinedresser."** He doesn't use a general, inclusive pronoun. He doesn't say, **"Our Father,"** like when he teaches us to pray (Matt. 6:9). Jesus uses the exclusive pronoun, **"My."** And this is an interesting feature in *The Gospel of John*. Several times Jesus speaks of God using the title, **"My Father."** And he never speaks of God as being anyone else's Father until after his resurrection. In the other gospels, Jesus does occasionally use the phrase, **"Our Father,"** but John avoids that phrase in his gospel because he's setting us up for when Jesus sends a message to his disciples saying, **"I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God"** (20:17). The point John makes by doing this is that after Jesus' death and resurrection, the fatherhood of God extends to cover all who believe in Jesus. Because Jesus died and rose again, God becomes our Father. Jesus, of course, retains the exclusive right to be called *the* Son of God. And this exclusive right is what he's claiming for himself when he says, **"My Father is the vinedresser."**

Now this might make us scratch our heads a little bit, because Jesus' first bold claim was that he *is* God. Now he's claiming to be the *Son* of God. Which is it? How can you be God and the Son of God? Does this mean that Jesus is his own Father? Answer: No; Jesus is not his own Father. This is where we get into Christology and a little bit of the doctrine of the Trinity. Jesus is both God and the Son of God. But how can this be? Actually, it has to be this way; it cannot be otherwise. It's the same way we all can say that we are humans and the children of humans. When humans have children, what is the nature of those children? Human, obviously. When squirrels have children, what is the nature of those children? Chimpanzees, right? No, still squirrels. When a certain being has a child, that child is the same species as the parent. So Jesus, the Son of God, is the same "species," if you will, as God the Father. He has the same divine nature as the Father. He is perfect. He is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He is just. He is loving. And he is eternal. In a word, he is God. The Son of God must be God. If he were not God, he could not rightly be called the Son of God.

So this verse, John 15:1, is rather significant for our Christology because in one breath Jesus identifies himself as God and as the Son of God. He claims to be both.

The third bold claim actually comes between these two, but I wanted to treat the other two together, so this one gets bumped to third. Jesus claims to be “**the true vine.**” What does this mean? This one requires a little bit of Old Testament background, but don’t worry, I won’t make you learn any more Hebrew. In the Old Testament, the people of Israel were God’s vine. Psalm 80:8 says, “You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.” And in Jeremiah 2:21, God says, “I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?” In the Old Testament, God’s vine was Israel. But Israel was disobedient to God. They strayed and sinned and worshipped other gods. So Jesus comes along and says, “**I am the true vine.**” In other words, Israel was a placeholder or a shadow. Jesus is the real deal. He comes to succeed where Israel failed. He comes to be faithful where they were faithless. Jesus, the true vine, is the true Israel. And all who believe in Jesus are members of the true Israel.

Sometimes the opponents of this doctrine call it “replacement theology.” But that’s a misleading term. We’re not saying that the Church in the New Testament replaces the Old Testament nation of Israel. We’re saying that the true Israel has always been Jesus. Jesus doesn’t say, “I am the replacement vine.” He says, “**I am the true vine.**” He does not replace the Old Testament nation of Israel, and the Church does not replace Old Testament Israel. Rather, the Old Testament nation of Israel was a foreshadowing of Jesus. And every believer in the Old Testament is a branch of the true vine, just as every believer today is a branch of the true vine. It has always been about Jesus. Jesus is the true vine. He is the true Israel, and he always has been. In order for any person to be a member of God’s Israel, they must abide in Jesus. When Jesus calls himself “**the true vine,**” he is claiming to be the true Israel of God and the only way to the Father.

These three bold claims are enough to make our heads spin. So let’s review. In one breath Jesus claims to be God, Israel, and the Son of God. If you’re confused, just think of it this way: Jesus is a really big deal. He is our God, and he is our way to eternal life.

Now let’s think about this imagery of the vine. This, again like last week, is a picture of authority. Like the Good Shepherd is the authority over the sheep, the true vine is the authority over the branches. But it’s not the selfish kind of authority where the head uses their authority for personal gain. It’s the virtuous, God-ordained kind of authority where the head uses his authority to serve those under his authority. The branches receive life from the vine. The vine is the source of water and nutrients.

And this image of the vine and the branches reveals the intimacy between Jesus and his believers. We are in him, and he is in us. To be a branch does not really distinguish us from the vine. It actually identifies us with the vine. Imagine you’re looking at a vine. And you take a step back to view the whole thing. You see a whole bunch of branches. And you say, “That’s a vine.” If you examine it closely, you might be able to distinguish the branches from the main part, but viewed as a whole, the branches are all members of the vine. You can say of the whole thing, “That’s a vine.” In the same way, we are members of Christ. We belong to him. We are his, we are a part of him. We are in him, and he is in us. This is what happens when we are baptized into Christ. And being baptized into Christ, we grow and bear fruit, because we are members of this vine.

This is essential to understand about the Christian life. Good works, or what Jesus often calls “fruit,” are the result of abiding in Christ. One of the ways in which we might go wrong here is when we think of good works as something we do in order to earn our way into the vine. That

would be like a dead branch going to the Dollar Store, buying some plastic fruit and scotch tape so he can dress up like a living branch. It's absurd, and it's not going to work. Real fruit is the result of abiding in the vine.

The other way we might go wrong is when we think that producing more fruit will make us better branches. This is the "try harder" kind of Christianity. You've maybe heard someone preach this before. *The reason your repentance didn't work before is because you weren't committed enough. You have to totally commit yourself this time.* You've probably preached it to yourself before. It's the kind of thing where we realize that we are a sinful mess, and we resolve to be better. *That must be the solution. Be better. Improve yourself.* So we try. And it sort of works, until we realize that it didn't work at all. So then we think, *I just have to try harder.* So we try harder and harder until we either die or give up, because it's futile. It's like a branch trying to pop out more fruit by pushing really hard. It doesn't work.

Real fruit is the result of abiding in the vine. Good works do not come by focusing on good works. They actually come from Jesus. He is the vine. Apart from him we can do nothing (15:5). That means Jesus is really the source of all good works. So we have no good works that we can boast in. But we also have nothing to condemn us. Our sins have been taken up by Jesus. We glory in Jesus. We boast in Jesus. He is our authority, and we have comfort in that authority.

To be under the authority of Jesus Christ means that we receive life from him, both now and for all eternity. I recently heard someone say—I don't remember who it was; I wish I did so I could give them credit—they said, "The greatest joy of being a Christian is knowing that I belong to someone else." Luther put it this way in the Small Catechism: "Jesus Christ ... has redeemed me ... not with silver and gold, but with His holy and precious blood and with his innocent sufferings and death; *in order that I might be His own, live under Him in His kingdom, and serve Him in everlasting righteousness, innocence, and blessedness.*" There's a real comfort to being under Jesus' authority. There is freedom in belonging to Jesus.

We, in our sinful natures, have an independent streak. We want to be our own vine. But we cannot be our own vine. A branch that tries to be its own vine is just a branch, separated from the vine. And branches separated from the vine are necessarily dead. This is our sinful desire, and it is wearying. There is no life apart from the vine. And so, it becomes a great comfort to Christians to learn that we are not our own. We belong to Christ. We are in him. He is in us. He is our source of life.

Imagine again that you are looking at a vine. You stepped back to see the whole thing. But then you look down at your feet. There at your feet is a lonely branch. Is it alive? Or is it dead? It is, by definition, dead. It may be withered already, or it may still be green. But since it is separated from the vine, it will soon wither and become more obviously dead. It cannot bear fruit. It cannot grow leaves. Separated branches die. There's no way around it. They always die. For this very important reason Jesus says, "**Abide in me**" (15:4). Abiding in Jesus, we receive life.

Now let's be practical. How do we abide in Jesus? We have to be where Jesus has promised to be and where he has promised to feed us. We have to be with the other branches, receiving Jesus' gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation through his Word and Sacraments. In other words, we abide in Christ by worshipping with the rest of the congregation. The local Christian congregation is the body of Christ on earth. And this is where we receive the life-giving nutrients of the vine. Now you might say, *But don't I abide in Christ during my daily devotions?* Of course you do! *And don't I abide in Christ every moment of every day because I belong to him?*

ABIDE IN JESUS (John 15:1-8)

Of course you do! But it's not an either-or. Our private devotional lives begin with our corporate worship. Whenever someone abandons corporate worship, saying, "I have my Bible; I'll be fine," it usually doesn't take long and they drift from the Christian faith. We need to abide in the vine with the other branches.

And you might think, *Well, you're a pastor. You just want me to come to church.* You got me. I do want you to come to church. I enjoy having you here. The other branches enjoy having you here too. And most of all, we don't want you to be separated from the vine. Jesus is here to feed you with the life-giving nutrients of his Word and Sacraments. We do not want you to become a dead branch.

Of course, I'm preaching to the choir. You're doing the very thing I'm preaching about. You are here, right now, feeding on the Word. Or you're listening online, hearing the Word, and, I hope, considering when you can connect with the other branches again. You know the value of this. I'm preaching to the choir. Jesus was also preaching to the choir when he said this to his disciples. They were already abiding in him. Unfortunately, the choir is the only people to preach to. But the choir needs to hear this: Abide in the vine. Abide in Christ. Hear his Word. Partake of his body and blood. Receive the life-giving nutrients from him.

Jesus is the vine. We are the branches. In order for us to live and bear fruit, we must abide in the vine. Jesus is our source of life. Both now and into eternity, Jesus is our source of life. He was crucified for our sins. He was raised from the dead, and he lives forever to feed us with the new life of his resurrection. Amen.

Alleluia! Christ is risen!
He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!
Amen.