

Who is Jesus? The Vine
8th Sunday after Pentecost,
July 26, 2009

We've been on a journey the past several weeks. We've been looking at Jesus and what He says about Himself in order to learn more about Him from His own mouth, rather than from our own thoughts.

We've seen that He is the great I AM – God Himself who took on flesh and bone. He is the Bread of Life who comes to us and gives Himself, and requires complete surrender to His Lordship in our lives as He tells us point blank, “Stop grumbling.” He is the Light of the World that shines in the darkness of our sins and exposes them for the purpose of forgiving them. He is the Gate through which we get into Heaven, and He is the Good Shepherd who loves us enough to break our legs, if necessary, so He can carry us and we can grow closer to Him. Last week we saw that He is the only way to get to Heaven – every other way will fail.

We're looking today at the last I AM statement of Jesus in the book of John. Our reading today is from John 15:1-6, where Jesus calls Himself the Vine. There are two things we are going to look at today – our relationship to Jesus, and the result of that relationship.

Jesus calls Himself the Vine. The vine is the main part of the plant; the branches are the offshoots of the vine. The branches are totally dependent on the vine for their very lives. If the branches lose the vine, or separate themselves from the vine, they will die.

Jesus is our vine – He is the one who gives us life, yes, but even more He is the one who gives Eternal Life in Heaven. We get eternal life in Heaven through faith in Him, which Jesus calls “remaining in Him” in these verses.

Here's the thing! Here's the exciting thing: in the Greek this word that gets translated as ‘remain’ (or ‘abide’ in some translations), means to remain in a place or state, *and expect something in the future.*¹ Remain in me, Jesus says, and you will have life. Remain in me, and expect Life with a capital “L” – Eternal Life in Heaven with me, forever!

What does it mean to abide or remain in Jesus? It means to be in fellowship with Christ so the Spirit can work in and through us. This means being in the Word of God and the confession of sin so that nothing hinders our communion with Him. We can't have communion with a perfect God if we're holding on to sin and refusing to confess – naming it so it is exposed and doesn't have the same hold over us it once did – and repent – having a change of heart and mind that results in a change in life. In other words, “over there is my sin, so I'm going to go over this way.”

¹ Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Greek (New Testament): 3531 μένω

“Well how do I know for sure if I’m remaining in Christ? Is there a special feeling?” No. In fact, Luther used to say, ‘feelings come and go and are deceiving.’ However, there are special evidences that appear and they are unmistakably clear. For one thing, when you are abiding in Christ, you produce fruit (John 15:2). Now what does that mean?

You know that verse I’m going to mention: 2 Corinthians 3:15, “Whoever is in Christ is a new creation, the old has died and the new has been born!” With new life that comes about through remaining in Christ comes the fruit of that life. Next to these verses in your Bibles, you can write Galatians 5:22-23, “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.” How do you know if you or someone else is remaining in the branch of Jesus and producing fruit? Look at the amount of love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control in their lives... at all times.

These fruits are not temporary states of being as in, “I was full of joy until I saw you!” Then you weren’t full of *real* joy, the kind of joy that comes from the Holy Spirit. “I have self-control, but you make me so angry, I can’t help myself and lose control and yell and get loud and curse and swear!” No, no, no. Then you *do not* have the Spirit-given fruit of self-control. How do you know if you or someone else is remaining in the vine of Jesus and producing fruit? Because the fruit lasts. This doesn’t mean there won’t be times when we slip and fall into sin and display the opposite of these fruits listed in Galatians, it just means that those times will be the out-of-the-ordinary times, not the norm. Those are the times when people will say of us, “They aren’t normally like that” versus, “Oh, that’s just the way they are.” Or what’s even worse is when we say, “That’s just the way I am.”

The other thing that remaining in Jesus means is that we will experience pruning. This is the part people don’t really like to talk about or think about. The greatest judgment God could bring to a believer would be to leave them alone, let them have their own way. Because God loves us, He “prunes” us and encourages us to bear more fruit for His glory. If the branches could speak, they would confess that the pruning process hurts; but they would also rejoice that they will be able to produce more and better fruit.

Your Heavenly Father is never nearer to you than when He is pruning you. Sometimes He cuts away the dead wood that might cause trouble; but often He cuts off the living tissue that is robbing you of spiritual vigor. Pruning does not simply mean spiritual surgery that removes what is bad. It can also mean cutting away the good and the better so that we might enjoy the best. Yes, pruning hurts, but it also helps. We may not enjoy it, but we need it.

How does the Father prune us? Sometimes He simply uses the Word to convict and cleanse us. Sometimes He must discipline us (Heb. 12:1–11). At the time, it hurts when He removes something precious from us; but as the “spiritual crop” is produced, we see that the Father knew

what He was doing. The pruning of a vine involves cutting back live wood to improve its fruitfulness and the removal of dead wood that might spread decay

The more we abide in Christ, the more fruit we bear; and the more fruit we bear, the more the Father has to prune us so that the quality keeps up with the quantity. Left to itself, the branch might produce many clusters, but they will be inferior in quality. God is glorified by a bigger crop that is also a *better* crop.

That doesn't really help, though, does it, when we find ourselves in the middle of the pain of pruning? Is there anything else we can cling to when we are being pruned? There are three things we can keep in mind.

First, sometimes we are pruned to draw us closer to Christ. In the midst of pain and trials is when we turn to our Savior and fall on Him. The very process of pruning drives us back to the Vine from where we get our very life.

Second, pruning can also be used to mature and deepen our faith. There are those who, frankly, have a rather shallow faith. They come to church regularly, they participate in church-y activities, but their faith really isn't an integral part of their lives – it's nothing more than an hour or so on Sunday mornings. When being pruned, rather than running away, blaming other people and looking for a scape-goat, how about instead digging deeper into God's Word, spending more time in prayer, and studying the things of God? In doing this, the season of pruning draws us closer to Christ and matures and deepens our faith.

Why would God allow such extreme things to draw us into Him or to mature us? Couldn't He accomplish spiritual maturity in us without us going through painful or unsettling or difficult circumstances? Sure He could, but frankly He probably has to allow something that extreme to happen to get our attention! Parents – think of the times you told your child not to do something so they wouldn't get hurt. You told them over and over again, but they kept wanting to do the very thing you told them not to. Did you ever reach the point where you realized that the only way they were going to learn was to suffer the consequences of doing the thing you knew wasn't good for them to do?

Because Ina Armstrong told me she likes hearing stories of my childhood, I'll share this one with you that relates to this point. Believe it or not, when I was a boy, I was really into what today would be called extreme bicycling. For instance, I had a speedometer on a bicycle I owned, and there was a very steep hill near our home that I would just fly down, topping out around 45-50 miles per hour. It was a great rush!

I also used to like to set up ramps in our driveway and jump my bicycle on them. Now you have to understand our driveway was long, and had a little bit of a downhill grade to it. I'd set the ramp up at one end of the driveway, and then start out at the other end of the driveway by the road, and just peddle as hard as I could until I hit that ramp at the end and flew up to the clouds.

And my daddy didn't like that.

In fact, I clearly remember him telling me I was going to get hurt or ruin my bicycle.

I also clearly remember the last time I ever set a ramp up in our driveway. I got the great idea to give the ramp just a little more of an incline than normal, and start my approach from about a quarter of a mile down the road. I started pumping and pumping and peddling and peddling and I turned into my driveway and just kept going faster and faster until I hit that ramp and flew to the moon!

There's only one problem with hitting a ramp on a bicycle and flying to the moon: you have to come down at some point. And when I came down two things happened: my bicycle made a noise that sounded a lot like crunching metal, and I lost control when I landed and nearly had a major wipe-out that probably would have resulted in broken bones. My bike was ruined, and my body was in pain.

And my daddy saw it all.

I can't really repeat what he said to me just then, but suffice it to say I learned my lesson. I had to get a new bicycle, and decided on my own to put the ramp away.

Here's the point – I had to experience the extreme consequences of my own actions to learn and grow up a little; to mature a little. And God does the same thing for us – we are pruned sometimes as the result of our own actions, so that we will mature in our faith and through that maturing, produce more and better fruit.

Finally, God can use suffering, He can use pruning, to bring about His good purpose and plan. I think the story that illustrates this best in the Bible is the story of Joseph in the Old Testament. Joseph was sold by his brothers into slavery in Egypt. While in Egypt he was falsely accused of attempted rape, was thrown into a dungeon for a couple of years, and was completely forgotten about by one whom he thought to be a friend.

But, through a series of God-ordained circumstances, Joseph was released from the dungeon and literally overnight became the second most powerful person in all of Egypt. The only person with more power than Joseph was the Pharaoh, or the King of Egypt. In Joseph's new position, he was responsible for gathering grain together for seven consecutive years to prepare for a horrible famine that God had revealed to him was coming. When the famine came, all the people in that part of the world ended up coming to Egypt for food – including Joseph's brothers who sold him into slavery in the first place. The significant thing about this was that God's plan for you and me being here today, are tied up in that young man being sold as a slave. Because of Joseph's actions in Egypt, he was able to save the life of his brother, Judah. Why is that important to you and me? Judah is an ancestor of Jesus. If Judah had died in that famine, the line to Jesus would have been wiped out.

I am almost positive that at no time after he was sold into slavery and ended up forgotten in the pit of a dungeon, did Joseph ever say, “Thank You, God, for pruning my life this way.” And yet, because of what Joseph went through, Judah lived and the line to Jesus continued, and to a certain extent, continues today in you and me. In a way, Judah is our ancestor too – a spiritual ancestor, anyway.

It wasn't pleasant for Joseph to experience all he did, but it turned out to be exactly what was needed to fulfill God's plan. It strikes me that Joseph died without ever fully realizing what his life meant to those who would come after him. We know that he came to understand that what happened to him was for the best in what *he* thought the long-run was – saving people in the famine. But he never understood the even greater impact of his life of suffering on the world; on you and me.

Jesus is the Vine, we are the branches. We receive our very life from Him, and will receive our Eternal Life in Heaven with Him when He comes again.

...And this is where we're ending today! Call it the ol' pastoral hook if you will, but this is where we're going to pick it up next week as we conclude this series. There is one more place in the Bible where Jesus uses the phrase “I am the...” *something*... and it's where our hope ultimately lies, and the life our branch gives us.

Will you pray with me please?

Our Vine, thank You for feeding us branches. Our Heavenly Father, our Gardener, thank You for pruning us. When we are honest, we have to admit we don't always like being pruned, it hurts, God; it just plain hurts. We get confused, angry, sullen and depressed. Help us not to fall into those paths, though, but rather help us to turn to You, confess, repent and draw closer to Your truth through the power of Your Holy Spirit.

Thank You for loving us too much to leave us alone. Thank You for coming to us, saving us, and inviting us to come along with You on an incredible journey in this life, leading to an incredible life after.

Take us, our Vine, we are Your branches. Produce fruit in us that has both quality and quantity for Your Kingdom. Amen