

Gospel Community as Witness
A Connected Community
John 15:1-17

Don't you love the diversity found within God's grand creation? I love the varieties of colors and sounds and aromas that add beauty and grace to our everyday lives. Sometimes I realize that the choices we have in this land of plenty can create conflict for those who have difficulty making decisions and for those from places where choices are not so available. It may or may not surprise you to know that when you walk into a Starbucks, you are free to choose from over 87,000 options for coffees and teas, hot or cold, skim or whole or no milk, vinti or tall, cinnamon and/or vanilla – and, you get the point.

Maybe it is the endless choices we are offered that motivate us to so readily reduce ideas and causes into their simplest forms. Best-selling books tell us how to eliminate clutter and focus on three to five things to achieve success, or to accomplish our goals, or to be happy. If you were here last week, you know that I am not opposed to lists, although I doubt I will ever offer four lists in one sermon again. As I mentioned from the outset last week, lists can help organize and focus our thoughts, but they can also distract us from the deeper issues and truths that accompany a Scripture passage or a topic that is on everyone's minds.

Our text today, John 15:1-17, is one of those places where certain truths jump out at you, but it is unlikely we will plumb the depths of the truth found here in this lifetime. That should give you a hint of the danger of reducing Jesus' teaching to neat packages designed to accommodate the spiritual sensibilities of a people who like their unending choices reduced to manageable portions. To put it in more accessible terms, there is a danger of thinking that you know exactly what Jesus is saying in John 15 when there is so very much more going on than can be known simply by reading the text.

Today's message is the third of five sermons in a mini-series titled *Gospel Community as Witness*. When we love one another as Jesus loved us, we point to him in a way that attracts some and, as we will see next week, infuriates others. Here is where we are in the series:

- 1. The Gathered Community – John 10**
- 2. A Serving Community – John 13:1-17, 35**
- 3. A Connected Community – John 15:1-17**
- 4. A Persecuted and Comforted Community – John 15:18-16:33**
- 5. A Glorified and Sent Community – John 17; 20:19-23**

Today's text reminds us that we are a connected community – connected to Jesus *and* connected to one another. You are likely familiar with the imagery of vine and branches, and of a gardener, or, as the ESV says, vinedresser. Jesus uses this imagery in a parable – or, is it an allegory or an extended metaphor? Or perhaps, as some suggest, it is a Hebrew *mashal*, which is, in a manner of speaking, an extended parable that makes more than one point, such as was seen in the Good Shepherd teaching of John 10. Again, let me remind you that it will not be easy to wrangle the truths of John 15 into one concise point. Look for the following themes as we read our text: abiding in our union with Christ, fire and judgment, spiritual fruit, prayer, word – as in Word of God, God's sovereignty, love, sacrifice, commands, and obedience. That is at least ten of the concepts addressed in this text. There are more. Look for these and other themes as I read through our text, John 15:1-17. Would you please stand in respect for God's Word?

1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every 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. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide 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. 5 I 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. 6 If 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. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full.

12 “This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends. 14 You are my friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you servants, for the servant does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all that I have heard from my Father I have made known to you. 16 You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you that you should go and bear fruit and that your fruit should abide, so that whatever you ask the Father in my name, he may give it to you. 17 These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

I want us to think about several things Jesus taught his disciples, and, by extension, us, in John 15, some of which will not be apparent if you stay on the surface. Mercy – we will barely begin to swim in these waters before it will be time to get out of the water, but hopefully you will be able to swim in the deeper places later in the week. The first thing I want to point out is:

1. Jesus emphasized union with him above performance

If you read this text without care, you might conclude that you had better stay in the vine or you will shrivel up and die and be taken away to the fires of judgment. It is certainly true that those who are found outside the vine have no life in Christ and are headed for judgment. But Jesus, although speaking directly with the 11 apostles, intended his teaching for more than his disciples, as John knew when he wrote his gospel, nearly 60 years after Jesus' death and resurrection, somewhere close to A. D. 90, and a branch was no more able to connect itself to the vine, then, than it is now.

In the OT, the nation of Israel was referred to as a vine. In Psalm 80, the themes of the vine and the Son of Man are combined as a promise, but often when the imagery of vine is mentioned in the OT, Israel is being compared to a vine that the Lord planted but had gone bad and produced foul grapes. Here, in this Farewell Discourse, Jesus is saying that *he* is the true vine, the ultimate source of eternal life and blessing for the branches – or, for those who believe in him. It is likely that the branches that are cut out of the vine and burned in this extended metaphor are those who seek eternal life apart from Christ, as most of the Jewish people did and as the Apostle John would have known when he wrote his Gospel. In other words, the branches destined for the fire are those who have a show of godliness, but who are dead on the inside because they are not united with Christ.

So many of the teachings of Christ, here and elsewhere, are about identification, not about warning. Jesus simply says, “Those who are directly connected with me are alive and will produce fruit. It is their nature. Those who do not produce fruit are not associated with me and will be judged.” It may feel like a warning that was intended to motivate the hearers to work for salvation because of the conditional language of verse 6, “If 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.” Was Jesus warning his disciples? No. Verse 3 says: “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” Do you remember what we read about last week from John 13 when Jesus said to the disciples as he washed their feet – “You are clean, though not all of you.” He said what he did at that point because Judas was still with the disciples. By the time of John 15, Judas had left to betray Jesus, so Jesus simply said, “Already you are clean because you have committed your life to doing good deeds.” Is that what he said? No – “You are clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” Remember in John 15:16 Jesus said, “You did not choose me, but I chose you to go and bear fruit.” Our assurance is not in our performance but in the promises of God, which is the focus of our next point:

2. We abide in Jesus as we immerse ourselves in God’s word

It is not that we just go into a trance, always doing the right thing. We are to abide in Jesus, and our fruit is conditioned upon our abiding in him. Abiding implies resting and trusting and that comes as we spend time in the Word. As my friend, Jimmy Elliott has said, “Growing in Christ has nothing to do with advancing upward and soaring higher. It involves diving deeper and deeper into the understanding of who Jesus is and what he has done for us. It is not so much growing, as we think of it, as it is dwelling in all that Jesus has told us about himself.”

Amen! Verse 7 says, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” A shallow reading of this verse may cause some to think of God as a celestial Santa Claus, giving us whatever we ask for. The whole of Scripture indicates this is not so. To pray in the name of Jesus is to pray that which is consistent with Jesus’ character and according to his glory and his will for the kingdom. We can never go wrong when we pray that way.

To abide in Christ is to rest in him. It is Mary, sitting at the feet of Jesus and hearing his word rather than Martha, who served admirably but missed the most important thing. It is Jesus calling to us in Matthew 11:28: “Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” In a day in which we measure our relationship with God by how passionately we serve him, it is necessary that we remember, as Brad Gray wrote in the blog, *Christ Hold Fast*, “The life of the Christian is the counterintuitive art of focusing less and less on your progress and more and more on Jesus’ performance.” A very timely word in a day where “progressive” indicates a passion to better the world – in man’s way. Better to abide in Christ, which leads to the next thought that permeates this text:

3. Spiritual fruit comes through God’s pruning and the believer’s prayers and obedience

Those of you who work in agriculture or who have roses and other plants at your home appreciate the benefit of pruning. I doubt seriously you have any problems with your conscience when you pull out the dead leaves and branches and cut back the healthy ones. Why would you cut back a healthy branch of a beautiful rose bush? So that the bush will produce even healthier and more beautiful roses in time. Therefore, no problem with the pruning. To think about being one of those branches, though, and to feel the shears and the gloved hands that are yanking and tearing – well, that is a different story. That is exactly what God does to his children, though. Why? For the same reason that you prune your garden – you love your plants. Jesus used this analogy to give us insight into the Father’s heart for us, even as he disciplines us when we have sinned and as he also cuts and shapes us when we have *not* sinned to make us healthier and stronger. Many of you had windows broken and cars damaged on Friday night’s storm. Pruning. Painful

pruning, but God’s love in shaping you to continue receiving life from the vine.

What is the fruit believers are said to bear? First, remember that we *bear* fruit – we do not *produce* fruit. That is the Lord’s domain – he produces, we bear. Is fruit the people we win to Christ or is it the fruit of the Spirit or Christian character? D.A. Carson, commenting on John 15, defines spiritual fruit in a very thorough manner. His definition of spiritual fruit is a bit lengthy, but it is worth our consideration. Quote: “These interpretations of spiritual fruit (converts, character, etc.) are reductionistic. The branch’s purpose is to bear much fruit (v. 5), but the next verses show that this fruit is the consequence of prayer in Jesus’ name, and is to the Father’s glory (vv. 7, 8, 16). This suggests that the ‘fruit’ in the vine imagery represents everything that is the product of effective prayer in Jesus’ name, including obedience to Jesus’ commands (v. 10), experience of Jesus’ joy (v. 11), love for one another (v. 12), and witness to the world (vv. 16, 27). This fruit is nothing less than the outcome of persevering dependence on the vine, driven by faith, embracing all of the believer’s life and the product of his witness.” End quote. In other words, dive deep, my friends, dive deep. Next:

4. The greatest love involves sacrifice

In verse 13, Jesus said, “Greater love has no one than this, that someone lay down his life for his friends.” Even though Jesus had repeatedly told his disciples that he would be executed on a cross and would rise from the dead three days later, the disciples were thoroughly shocked a couple of hours after Jesus said this when he was arrested and put on trial. At the time he spoke these words, they must have thought he was offering a nice sentiment – not one they would likely be called to fulfill, but nice anyway – “Oh yeah, you truly love someone when you are willing to die for him or her.”

Jesus' death, of course, included a sacrifice for sin that we are incapable of making. He died for sinners, that whoever will repent of his sin and believe that Jesus died in her place will be saved. We could never die in that manner for someone else, but true love involves sacrifice and it is seen in our final point:

5. Our connection with Christ is evidenced by our connection with the gospel community

It is no accident that Jesus followed his teaching about abiding in him through time in the word and in prayer with a call to obey his commandment about loving one another. Jesus said it plainly, in verse 17: "These things I command you, so that you will love one another."

Who was Jesus talking to? To fishermen, to a doubter, to a tax collector and a political zealot who had previously sought the overthrow of Roman government. Wait, what? Among Jesus' disciples were both Matthew, who had worked for the Roman government as a tax collector, a profession despised by most Jews because Jewish tax collectors working for Rome often extorted their fellow countrymen to line their own pockets as they collected Roman taxes. Disgusting! Simon the Zealot would have either happily killed Matthew earlier in his life or he would have at least not minded if one of his compatriots had killed the dirty traitor. Simon wanted nothing less than the overthrow of an illegitimate and corrupt government, and Matthew represented all that was wrong with the government. But that was before Simon and Matthew met Jesus. Isn't it interesting that as far as we know, Jesus never took sides? Both men were wrong. Jesus said things that would have bolstered the arguments of both and he said things that would have convicted the heart and conscience of both.

Jesus made it clear – if you love me, not only will you keep my words, but you will receive the others around you as friends, loving and forgiving one another and even going so far as to sacrifice your life for them. In so doing, not only will you bear fruit, but you will bear fruit that will last.

To be connected to Christ is to be connected to his church. Let me say it another way. To be committed to Christ is to be committed to the gospel community in which the Lord has placed you. It does not necessarily work the other way around, but it does at least work in the one direction – if you love Jesus, you will love his church.

Think of all the ways Jesus connected his disciples to one another on this night before he was crucified. Not only did he wash their feet, which would have had a powerful way of connecting them to one another in the days ahead, but he also instituted the Supper in which all believers would participate until Jesus returns in glory to establish his kingdom on earth. At the Lord's Table, we are not only connected to Jesus, we are connected to one another. In the Supper, we eat bread and drink *the fruit of the vine* – interesting, huh? We drink the fruit of the vine. There is no connection that I know of, it is just interesting. In eating the bread and drinking the wine or the juice, we recall Jesus' suffering for us and we affirm our union with Christ as he affirms his union with us. And so we come to the Table today, as we do every first and third Sunday of the month. Next week, the latter part of John 15 and the 16th chapter of John will instruct us in the ways we are bound to Christ and to one another by the Holy Spirit and through suffering. This morning, we remember Jesus' suffering on the cross so that we might have eternal life. Let's pray as we prepare our hearts for communion.