

Sermon: Abiding in Love

New North Church, Hingham

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29 April 2018

Based on **1 John 4:7-21, John 15:1-8**

The word *abide* occurs a total of twelve times between our two readings, five times in today's passage from John's Gospel. The word *love* occurs 26 times in John's letter alone, more if you count the *Beloveds*.

The English word *abide* means "to remain" (as in the hymn, "Abide with me, fast falls the eventide") or "to endure" (as in "I cannot abide the way my daughter makes right-hand turns in my car, especially in tight parking garages"). The word *abide* and its Greek equivalent have a wide range of meaning. In Isaiah 30:18, the Hebrew is translated into English as "blessed are those who wait for him," while the Greek version translates as "blessed are those who *abide in* him." In Jeremiah 31:32, the Hebrew is translated as "they broke my covenant," while the Greek version says, "they did not *abide in* my covenant."

John uses this word quite often, as we just heard in today's readings. Nowhere does John suggest that abiding is optional for believers. Genuine believers abide, and false believers do not.¹ In John, to abide is a two-way street and as loaded a word as the 'I am' phrase, which we will get to later.

In Southern Africa, there is a philosophy called Ubuntu, which reflects a belief in a "universal bond of sharing that connects all humanity." The word *ubuntu* can be translated as, 'Because we are, I am.' In other words, we're all in this together. Michael Onyebuchi Eze, a historian of culture and social change, particularly in South Africa, says that 'Humanity is a quality we owe to each other,' meaning we ought to treat people like people, sort of like Jesus teaching us to love our neighbor.

This is one of the toughest things for people to do. Cultural, religious, economic, and political differences all seem to get in the way of our fulfilling this simple commandment.

Given the perpetual state of the world, what does it mean to preach 'God is love?'

If we love one another, John says, then 'God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.'

As John points out, the problem is fear. Fear divides us. Fear is a powerful motivator.

Fear can also keep us safe. Fear is, as someone once said, ‘the parent of caution.’

Our friend Tony, who is Italian but has a Spanish last name, once told me that his name means ‘Caution’ in English, and he said that describes him perfectly because he’s cautious. But faith must be more than that. Faith must be built on love, and love is fearless.

The message of the Gospel is, God *is* love, and it becomes the answer to our human anxieties: God is love. The world of people can be ruthless, cruel, impersonal, and complicated. But God is love. The eternal Creator of all that is shares infinite mercy, compassion, and love with all who ask for it. If you have love, then you know God.

In John’s Gospel, if we remove chapters 15, 16, and 17, then the last verse in chapter 14 would match up with the first verse in chapter 18 and would read like this: “Jesus said, ‘I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father. Rise, let us be on our way’ (John 14:31). After Jesus had spoken these words, he went out with his disciples across the Kidron valley to a place where there was a garden, which he and his disciples entered” (John 18:1). You can look it up.

We only point this out to show that for John and his later editors, it was more important to present truths about Jesus and God than it was to present a strictly chronological narrative. (It’s also interesting to see how one thread of the story can be dropped and then picked up again. This is not unique to John.)

So, what are the important truths about Jesus and God that John wants us to know in this passage? There are two: the imagery of the vine and the branches, and Jesus’ use of the ‘I am’ phrase. They are important because they highlight how Jesus claims identity with God the Father. For those with ears to hear, there can be no confusion about what kind of Messiah Jesus claims to be, yet the religious authorities are continually confused and angered by what they are hearing from Jesus, and throughout John’s Gospel, they want to stone him, arrest him, and then ultimately kill him for what they think he says about himself.

In the Scripture John knew, what we call the Old Testament, the vine symbolism is cultural and familiar; it even appears on some coins. Vine and vineyard imagery are everywhere in Scripture, but not always in a positive way.² The pruned branches are always burned, which is a sign of God’s judgement. But the vine and the branches also symbolize fruitfulness, specifically Israel’s fruitfulness. Over time, the vine became associated with the Messiah, who happens to be, now, in our story, Jesus, which is why John swiped the imagery.

Notice that Jesus says, ‘I am the *true* vine,’ not some cheap knock-off and not even Israel any more. This might have been problematic for John’s faith community, since it was made up of both Jews and Gentiles, but for him and for us, the metaphor speaks of spiritual unity, communion, fruitfulness, and the need for occasional pruning, done by God the vine grower.

Jesus uses the ‘I am’ phrase frequently in John’s Gospel, but it doesn’t always stand out in the English translation. When Jesus calms the storm, he says, in English, ‘It is I; do not be afraid’ (6:20). Literally, he says, ‘I am; do not be afraid.’ When he was speaking with the Samaritan woman at the well, when she told him that she knew the Messiah was coming, he said, literally, ‘I am, the one who is speaking to you’ (4:26). In a discussion with some Pharisees about Abraham being their spiritual father, Jesus said, ‘Before Abraham was, I am,’ which prompted them to pick up stones to throw at him (8:56). When he was arrested in the garden, he asked the soldiers who they were looking for, and when they answered, ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ he answered, ‘I am’ (18:5-8). On the other hand, after the arrest, when a woman asked Peter if he was one of the disciples, he answered, ‘I am not.’

Various, Jesus says about himself, ‘I am the bread of life,’ ‘the light,’ ‘the gate,’ ‘the good shepherd,’ ‘the resurrection and the life,’ and, today he says, ‘I am the true vine.’

When Moses first met God, he said if I say the God of your fathers has sent me, the Israelites will want to know his name. He said, ‘What shall I say to them?’ And God replied, ‘*Ehyeh-Asher-Ehyeh*,’ which can mean ‘I Am That I Am,’ ‘I Will Be What I Will Be,’ or ‘I Am the One Who Makes Things Happen.’ The god the Israelites came to know as YHWH – Yahweh or ‘I AM’ – is that same god of their ancestor Abraham, the god of the ever-lasting covenant. YHWH – the LORD – meets people in history and comes to them in their time of need. John wants us to know that God’s presence among us is more than a future gift or promise. Here we have Jesus saying, God is here right now, embodied in him, the resurrection and the life.

Let’s put it all together: Jesus is the true vine, and we are the branches; those who abide in Jesus, in the sense that we *remain* with Jesus in faith, will be fruitful, but we have to do it together, in communion with Jesus and with each other. In God’s eyes, we are fruitful when we are all together on the vine. God will do any pruning necessary to keep the vine healthy and productive.

At the same time, we are called to love one another, all of us on the vine, because love is from God. God nurtures the vine and God’s love sustains it. God’s love casts out fear.

The oldest wineries in Europe go back a thousand years. That's a lot of harvests and a lot of wine. Not every year can be a vintage year, but with careful management the vineyard owners can count on something good coming from their vines. They can expect a consistent year-after-year harvest if the weather is kind and the pruning effective. It's hard work and you never know if or when things might go wrong. But their lives are wrapped up in those vines. The vineyard owners know two things: that being fearful of a bad harvest gets them nothing and that nurturing the vines with love gets them everything. They abide in the vines and the vines in them.

God *is* love.

Amen.

¹ Adapted from Collins, C. John. "Abiding in the Vine." *Christianity Today*, no. 12 (March 2016): 48.

² For example, Psalm 80, Isaiah 5:1-7, throughout Jeremiah and Ezekiel, and so on.