

“Abide in Me”

In the name of him whom God sent into the world so that through him we might live, dear friends in Christ: Today’s Gospel reading contains one of the famous “I am” statements of Jesus. With most of them we are quite familiar, like: “I am the Light of the world”, “I am the resurrection and the life”, “I am the way, the truth, and the life”, and the one we heard last week in which Jesus said, “I am the Good Shepherd”. In each one of these “I am” statements, Jesus gives us another description of who he is with respect to us. Each one helps us to better understand his relationship with us. And so it is also with the one before us this morning in which Jesus calls himself the True Vine; but my guess is that this one is not quite as familiar to most of us. It’s perhaps a little harder for us to visualize than some of the others.

Why’s that? Well, it’s mostly because unlike the land of Palestine, southwest Iowa is not known as wine country. And yes, I know, there are a few vineyards popping up here and there; but these are fairly recent developments. The fact is that most of us have never stood in a commercial vineyard much less ever worked in one; whereas for the people to whom Jesus first spoke these words, it was a common occurrence. Vineyards were everywhere, and at certain times of the year they require a lot of labor, say in the spring when it’s time to train the branches so they’ll grow on the trellises, and in the fall to harvest the grapes, and again at the end of the year to remove and carry away the old growth. At such times, practically everybody in town who could work would be called out to help. Those folks knew all about vineyards. And so they could readily apprehend what Jesus meant when he said, “I am the True Vine.” We, on the other hand, will be helped by a little more explanation.

And part of the reason for that is when we think of grapevines, we think of pretty much the whole grape plant – or at least everything that’s above ground. And chiefly we think of those long, stringy extensions of the grape plant that run horizontally along the trellises and from which the clusters of grapes hang; because after all, in our minds that’s what a vine is: something long and rope-like. The trouble is that’s not what Jesus means when he says “I am the True Vine.” He’s using a different nomenclature. You see, when he says *vine*, he means primarily the vertical portion of the plant: that central trunk that rises from the root to the top of the trellis, say six or seven feet up, and then divides into two and extends several feet each way forming what looks like a large letter T. This is the part of the plant that remains year after year and grows to be rather thick and substantial. From this vine, then, grow the branches. Each spring the vine shoots out those rope-like branches that are trained to hang on the trellises, and it’s these branches that grow leaves and develop the fruit. But then after harvest, in the winter, the branches are all cut away again leaving just the bare vine behind.

For several years I was stationed at Fort Ord, which was on the coast of central California. That *is* wine country. And in the winter you could see the vineyards on the hills all around looking almost like military cemeteries with the bare vines standing there like row upon row of crosses. The biggest difference is that they were brown instead of white. And what’s interesting too is that because of the way they are thick and knotted and gnarled, each vine really does suggest the upper torso of a man with his arms extended. And I think this is key to understanding what Jesus is saying to us here. It just happens that Jesus gave us this “I am” statement on the very night he was arrested. In only a matter of hours his own arms would be extended like that as he hung nailed to the cross. And that, not coincidentally, is when and where he became for us the True Vine.

With this in mind, we can see that when Jesus says “I am the vine and you are the branches”, he’s saying that we, that is our lives, extend directly from his death. Just as the branches of the grape plant grow and get their sap and nourishment from the central vine, so we get our life-sustaining essence from the death of Jesus for our sins. And like the branches on a grapevine, we have only a short season of time to grow and to bear fruit for the owner of the vineyard. When our life’s season is done, we too will be stripped away to make room for the next generation of branches. Only Christ and his cross will remain to keep on giving his life and the benefit of his death to them so that they too will bear fruit in their generation.

But right now – while we live on this earth – it’s our turn. Now is the season for us to bear fruit for the owner of the vineyard—that’s why he planted the True Vine and that’s why he caused us to grow forth from him: to bear fruit. And that’s why it’s imperative that above all else we remain ever connected to the True Vine. Jesus said “Abide in me.” The word he chose can also mean to dwell or to remain; but it’s the same idea no matter how you translate it. It means that he wants us to stay constantly connected to him – and specifically connected to his life-giving death on the cross for our sins. That’s what makes it possible for us to truly live and to bear fruit for God, because anything that we might do apart from Christ and his Cross is going to be judged unfit and unworthy, an abomination in the sight of the Lord. No, to bear fruit we must remain and abide in Christ.

How do we do that? Well, to explain, we’d better start with how we became connected to the True Vine in the first place. And for most of us, that was Baptism. That’s when the death of Jesus for your sins was first applied to you. That’s when you joined him in his death, burial, and resurrection; your sins were washed away; you were made a child of God through faith in Jesus; and you were given a new life in Christ. Some others may have come to faith first later in life through the Word and the Spirit, and then were baptized after that; but either way, that connection to Christ in Baptism happened just the same.

And then, from that humble beginning in water and the Word – just like the budding of a branch on the grapevine – your life in Christ began to grow. Jesus said we are to make disciples by baptizing and teaching. And so taught you were. You heard the words of Jesus. You heard the accounts of his life and ministry. You studied the Old Testament prophecies concerning him, and also learned the ancient stories that in many and various ways foreshadow his mission to earth to defeat Satan and save us from sin. And you let these words of Jesus dwell within you. That’s how you maintained your connection to the True Vine. He is, after all, the very Word of God.

And by his Words you also are being trained – just like grape branches need to be trained to stay on the trellis. On their own they try to grow every which way; but that’s not helpful. If a vine is not supported by the trellis, its fruit will end up lying on the ground where it will rot or be eaten by ants and other insects. Either way, it’s lost. So to prevent that from happening, the branches have to be pruned and turned and sometimes physically tied to the trellis. And it’s interesting that the word Jesus uses to describe this process, which our text translates as “pruning”, is in Greek the word for “cleansing”. This brings into clearer focus what Jesus means when he says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” As Jesus speaks his word, we are *cleansed* by him. We had a good example of that earlier in this morning’s service. In light of God’s word of law, we examined ourselves and found that we were sinful and unclean. And then together we confessed our sins to God and appealed to his forgiveness for the sake of his Son who gave his innocent life as the atoning sacrifice for our sins. And then, once again, through me you heard Jesus speak those words

that cleanse, "I forgive you all of your sins in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit."

Today, of course, we are observing the Rite of Confirmation. It is for us an important milestone in Christian discipleship – the continued growth of our branches, so to speak – and these young people before us will soon have an opportunity to publically declare their faith in Jesus in the very words that Jesus through his Church has given them to speak. Doing so, they will both be demonstrating that the Word of Jesus abides within them, and they will be displaying the first and primary form of fruit that the Lord wants the branches connected to the True Vine to bear: namely, the fruit of faith itself and the ability to confess the name of Jesus before the world.

It's important too because, in our tradition at least, it's upon Confirmation that members of the Church are admitted to the Lord's Table for Holy Communion. We do this because we want to make sure that those who commune are properly trained to self-examine and to understand and believe what's actually going on in the Sacrament – that in, with, and under the species of bread and wine, Jesus is truly present giving those who commune his very body and blood. And this is another means by which we the branches remain connected to Jesus the True Vine – and specifically connected to his death for our sins. It's another means by which we continue to abide in him, which is absolutely essential if we are going to bear any fruit.

For Jesus states emphatically what happens to those who do not continue to abide in him and his Word. They are like branches cut off from the vine. They can only wither and dry up. They produce nothing. Instead they are gathered up and thrown into the fire, which is strong judgment language. And I have to say it breaks my heart that so many of our young people who boldly confess their faith on the day of their Confirmation, and promise to remain firmly connected to the Vine – even if it means facing death – that they willingly through neglect and laziness and indifference effectively cut themselves off. It's spiritual suicide. Don't let it happen to you – or to you either, no matter how long ago you were confirmed.

Because, again, the Lord wants us connected to the True Vine so that we will live and bear fruit for him. What kind of fruit? I've already mentioned the first kind: it's faith itself; faith in Jesus that trusts in him, his blood-bought forgiveness, and the new life that he grants to us both in time and eternity. That's number one for by such faith we are saved. But saving faith never appears alone or by itself. No, the fruit the Lord wants us to bear are like grapes: they always come on in clusters.

And today's Epistle mentions two other kinds of fruit that appear with saving faith. One is what we might call spiritual discernment. The Apostle John warns us that because many false prophets have gone out into the world, we need to be on guard. Don't believe every spirit, he says, but test them to see whether they are from God. Just because someone comes along claiming to speak God's Word, doesn't mean that he is. And those who are abiding in Christ and his Word are the ones who are best equipped to recognize and reject an imposter. Whereas those who have stopped listening to Jesus, for whom the Words of Christ are but faded memories, and who are no longer receiving regularly his body and blood in Holy Communion, not surprisingly, they are usually the first to be led astray by false teachers. They haven't got the fruit of spiritual discernment to see the difference.

The other form of fruit mentioned in the Epistle is the greatest: it's love. And when I say love, I don't mean feelings of affection or romantic attachment. No, I mean the kind of love that Jesus himself displayed when he voluntarily set aside his heavenly glory, became our brother in

human flesh, took on the form of a servant, and then gave his life for us in the most brutal, painful, and humiliating way possible in order that through his sacrifice we might live. That's Christ's love – and Christian love imitates it. As John says, "Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another." And what this means is when we love each other, we too voluntarily set aside our own desires, comforts, and needs and give ourselves for the good and for the service of those who can benefit by our sacrifices. This is what the Lord wants to see in us – and indeed, it's what he is even now producing in us as we remain connected to Christ, our True Vine.

Therefore let us abide in him and him in us, now and always, that we may bear much fruit for him. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!