

Remain in Relationship

Garry Blinch - April 28, 2024

Intro

I am betting that almost everyone in church today (here or online) has heard or read many sermons, Sunday school lessons, devotionals and daily readings on “The Vine and the Branches.”

This is one of those passages that is a metaphor seemingly rich in applications, and clear at the outset what it is saying. But the danger with that is that our minds go to sleep thinking we know what this passage is all about, we’ve heard it all before ...but preachers don’t like it when congregants fall asleep- mind or body- and today, I’m that preacher!

Context

Part of the problem lies in how frequently we hear this passage with no reference to its context- *when* Jesus spoke these words is of critical importance.

The context is that these are some of the words of a man who knew that, in a short time- approximately 17 or 18 hours- he would be dead.

This is Jesus last opportunity- in this form of the relationship- to impress upon these 11 disciples what is of critical importance. They are soon to see their teacher, friend, rabbi- the promised Messiah- cruelly tortured and die on a cross. It’s important that they stay the course, or, at least, come back to it when they are reunited with Jesus in a new way. He saying these things as the man they always knew to reinforce all he was as he lived among them, interacting with the people of Judea and beyond.

Drawing life from the Vine

Their relationship is about to change. No longer will the Teacher be there in the flesh to guide, teach, correct and lead. In a short time, the Spirit will come to do the same for them- guide, teach, correct, lead. But it’s not the same experience, is it? It’s one

thing to have a person standing in front of you, looking you in the eyes and communicating love, or rebuke, or wisdom.

And so, Jesus says, “Abide in me as I abide in you.” When I am gone, continue on as I have shown you.

“Abide in me” - continue to do what you saw and heard me do when we spent our time together. As I abide in you- what I have invested in you, and soon, by the Holy Spirit, who will come upon you. God lived among humankind as a human to demonstrate, day by day, a life that didn’t have self at the centre but genuinely care about the well-being of the other. And how that kind of life brought about changes in people that religion could never do. A kinder, compassionate world where the disadvantaged were helped, not blamed for their struggles. Where the vulnerable were taken into community, not left out in the cold. Where honor lost its high price tag and authenticity was prized.

There were times, in those years with Jesus, that the disciples clearly had not understood what he was all about. These became important teaching moments, moments when the disciples revealed the natural human inclination to live out of the self and not see other as valuable or important. Jesus did not let these moments go by unchallenged and his responses laid bare the stark difference between living out of the self and living out of divine love.

Luke 9 provides us with 3 examples:

46 An argument arose among them concerning which one of them was the greatest. But Jesus, aware of their inner thoughts, took a little child and put it by his side and said to them, “Whoever welcomes this child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me, for the least among all of you is the greatest.”

It says in Philippians, “[Jesus] he made himself of no reputation.” He made himself “least”. He welcomed the child, the sex worker, the outcast and the disadvantaged. “Abide in me”- live as I lived in love toward all people.

A few verses later in Luke 9 we read this:

49 John said, “Master, we saw someone casting out demons in your name, and we tried to stop him because he does not follow with us.” But Jesus said to him, “Do not stop him, for whoever is not against you is for you.”

How often have people and groups been judged by others because, “they aren’t doing it the right way, the way we do it- they haven’t joined our group so they should be stopped before they do more damage.”

This is not the way Jesus saw it, and so, to abide in him means to have the same attitude. Not everyone who claims the name of Christ will reflect a slavish conformity that makes them all look the same in what they do, how they act, what they value.

When we think of our passage, it’s just like branches. Many branches are growing from the trunk or the vine, but they’re all different! As different as snowflakes- looking very similar with a casual glance but different in shape, size and fruit-bearing capacity when you look closer.

And in the very next passage in Luke 9 we read this:

51 When the days drew near for him to be taken up, he set his face to go to Jerusalem. And he sent messengers ahead of him. On their way they entered a village of the Samaritans to prepare for his arrival, but they did not receive him because his face was set toward Jerusalem. When his disciples James and John saw this, they said, “Lord, do you want us to command fire to come down from heaven and consume them?” But he turned and rebuked them. Then they went on to another village.

Here we see James and John, the “Sons of Thunder- so nicknamed by Jesus according to Mark 3:17- taking offence because this town of people weren’t going to receive this man who was going to Jerusalem. Maybe there was some racism subtly

influencing them? Samaritans had been generally despised by the Judeans for a long time....

How often have groups taken offence because there were people with the audacity to be disrespectful of their beliefs even when among a completely different population? How many times have Christians caused offence by disrespecting the customs and religions of other cultures?

The Son of God rebuked his own followers and just kept moving. James and John wanted to annihilate everyone!!

“Abide in me”... don’t take offence- keep moving and do what you know you need to be doing.

One more- the classic: Matthew 16

21 From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

And just moments ago, Peter had made his great declaration:

15 Jesus said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter answered, ‘You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.’

We see ourselves in Peter, the ability to perceive God among us and then to try to control it. In our arrogance we think we know best. It’s a common thing for people to think they are protecting a good thing, something that is beneficial to others, so they build a fence around it. But it’s only through transparency and vulnerability that any person or any movement or group can help others. And by being open to being changed by others.

Jesus was impressing on his 11 disciples that they needed to remain in him, draw life from him constantly if they ever hoped to impact the world, bring his message of love and life- which is to say, “bear fruit.”

And if they didn’t remain in him then they would be of no more use to the world than a stick that gets gathered and burned. I don’t see a pronouncement of judgement these words but a statement of fact and something the disciples were likely familiar with- that dead branches were gathered and burned for warmth, for cooking. But the picture is clear, the picture of a life that had nothing with which to feed or nourish the world- no fruit.

I think the greatest error the disciples could fall into was the error of thinking they had understood Jesus’ teaching and would now teach the world his message. Jesus wanted them to live as he did- everything he did he said it was doing as God had shown him, that he could do nothing without Creator God. Now the disciples were to speak and do as the living Christ in them was so moving them to do.

Conclusion

A branch properly connected to the vine is a living, growing thing. It needs to be pruned to be as fruitful as possible as the little “suckers” are removed, the extra shoots that can suck life from the parts of the branch that are producing fruit. And the branch never remains the same. As it grows it takes on new shapes, it produces more fruit one year and less another. No two branches look exactly alike. They are all connected to the same vine but each branch is unique.

The little self, the branch cut off from the vine, can do nothing. So Jesus says, “Remain in me as I remain in you” (John 15:4). The promise is constant from God’s side. The only question is from our side. Every time we do something with respect, with love, with sympathy, with compassion, with caring, with service, we are operating in union.

