

“Rooted in God’s Living Word”

October 15, 2006

John 15:1-11

Rev. Tom Cramer

I.

We now come to our sixth sermon grappling with what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ, not just in some superficial sense, but in a deeply rooted sense of who we are and how we’re called to live our lives.

Last week, Pastor Emily preached from the Psalms about one dimension of spiritual maturity, that of following God’s instructions for life. In her message, we discovered that the author of the first Psalm painted a word picture to convey the strength and security that people experience when they follow God’s instructions for life. They are like trees planted next to life-giving streams. But now we turn to another word picture.

Fast forward several hundred years as Jesus is walking with his disciples on the last night of his life. It is after the last supper on a Thursday night, and he’s walking across Jerusalem down to the Kidron Valley and over to the Garden of Gethsemane.

As he looks up to Herod’s temple, the one that was destroyed in 70 A.D., he sees great carvings of grapevines on the walls. Josephus, that great historian of the 1st century, tells us that when Herod built his temple he had great reliefs of grapevines carved into the walls because the Jewish people saw themselves as the “vineyard of the Lord.” The vineyard was, and still is today, an image of Israel and their relationship with God.

And so there were these vines, and Josephus says, the grapes were “as big as a man.” And as they walked by, they probably saw these grapes carved in the wall, and our Lord looks at these grapes and says to his disciples, “⁵I am the vine, you are the branches,” and tells this parable that we find in our sermon text this morning.

[CW: If you have a Bible, open up to John 15, and let’s make some reflections on this great passage. Let me read it to you. (Read John 15:1-11.) Let us pray.]

Let us pray as we begin:

II.

Our Lord told agricultural parables, he told relational parables, he even told parables about household appliances, but one thing you will notice about all of Jesus' parables is that they are freedom parables. Even though he creates a word picture of vines and branches, he treats the branches as if they can decide to abide in the vine or not to abide in the vine. In fact, a branch can't do that agriculturally, but in a parable it can. And so he calls upon the branch to "abide in the vine," to make that decision.

And then he talks about what God wants to do with that branch. And, of course, God wants that branch to bear much fruit. So God has a design for you life, you are made to abide in the vine, and God also has a plan for your life, to bear much fruit.

III.

Today, however, I want you to see an even more fundamental truth that is at the heart of this passage. It is a freedom passage, like all the parables are freedom parables, but there is something in this parable that is even more profound that I don't want you to miss today, especially as we grapple with the true nature of discipleship. This parable is about our source in Jesus Christ, he says, "abide in me," and the resources which flow from that source, "apart from me you can do nothing; those who abide in me bear much fruit."

IV.

The parable is first of all related to the source of our life. It's a source parable. You know these questions of sources and resources are so current for us today. We're always asking source questions. That's what makes this parable so timely for us. "Where you are from?" or "Who do you know?" or "What school did you attend?" Notice, it comes up in almost any conversation we have with people. It happens all the time. "Who's your family? What's your name? Where are you from? What school did you go to?"

And, we are a culture that's also very interested in resources. [Pause.] "How much money do you make? And, of course, if you are a real estate agent, and you're trying to buy a house, that's probably the first question the real estate agent will ask you: "Well, how much money do you think you can afford to pay? I mean, what are we talking about!? Are we talking about a \$300,000 house, a \$500,000 house, a million dollars?" You see, we want to know about your resources. Can you make the down payment? How much money do you have to spend?

So we're very conscious of these two questions. This parable that Jesus tells is about these two questions, but notice the order.

Fundamentally, the most exciting thing in this parable is that it teaches about our source. He says, "Abide in me, and I in you."

V.

Now let me do a word study with you. The word abide here, "meno" in Greek, is the same word used at the opening of this Thursday Night Discourse that begins back in Chapter 14. In Chapter 14, Jesus began the Upper Room Discourse by saying this, "Believe* in God, believe also in me. ²In my Father's house there are many—now the Old King James put it this way—in my Father's house are many mansions." The NRSV says, "many dwelling places." You know the word for mansions in Greek—"Meno," "dwelling places." The Old King James said, "mansions." It's still stuck in our memory. We love that. "In my Father's house there are many dwelling places, many mansions, many places to live." That's what he's promising.

Now in the 15th Chapter our Lord picks up that same word again and says, "Abide in me"—notice he uses a play on the words, now *meno* is a verb instead of a noun—"abide in me and I in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me." Over and over again the word "abide" is used. But it's a source word. It's the word about where you live.

VI.

Now let me make a very important point that I don't want you to miss. In the Christian faith, Jesus Christ himself is the source. He is our home. Our source is a person, not an energy, not a power. Those are resources! Our source is a person.

VII.

Now I realize that today, because we are so resource-oriented, that we're usually more resource-oriented than source oriented. And it happens even in Christian faith. It happens spiritually in people.

I meet people—more than I'd like to admit—where their main focus is how much power there is to be had in their faith, or as if God were a great faucet that they could turn on and off and get energy from. You remember the great Star Wars phrase, "The force be with you!"

And so many people are praying for that all the time, “Lord, give me more power. Lord, give me more energy. Lord, give more this, Lord, give me more that.”

It’s like seeing somebody who has a gift for you on your birthday, and you see them holding out the present, and you run up, grab the present, and run off with it, as if it’s the present you want more than the person. But the person is more important than the present.

And notice our Lord makes that so clear in this parable. The fruit is almost an afterthought. The key is the branch abiding in the vine, and notice he says, “and I in you.” Christian faith is first of all a relationship between you and Jesus Christ. Everything else is secondary. Do you believe that?

Or, are you more interested in what you can get from Jesus Christ? Some power for life, or power for survival, or power over other people—that’s the best power of all, isn’t it—to get other people to do what I want them to do? Some people are praying for this all the time, for some gift that I can use to prove God’s graciousness, or something like that.

But that is secondary. That’s the resource. What is fundamental in this passage is the source of your life, and that’s a relationship with Jesus Christ himself. The passage is fundamentally source-oriented. And secondarily, resource oriented.

VIII.

But nevertheless there is a wonderful resource. These disciples when they heard these words on Thursday night could not imagine the resources that they are going to discover just four days later on Easter morning, when their Lord who made the promise “I will abide in you and you will abide in me” will conquer death itself, will conquer sin, and will conquer the power of evil. And they will see a resource on Easter morning that literally takes their breath away. And believe me, I don’t want to downplay that resource. That resource is available to you and to me as well. But it’s secondary to the source.

It’s Jesus Christ that they first came to know and love. And isn’t it beautiful, we abide in him, and when we die, we don’t have a big surprise or something new to experience, we’re going to experience the same Lord that we met in the middle of our lives. The same Jesus Christ that the disciples knew on Thursday night is

the Jesus Christ they're going to meet on Easter. Can you see why the empty tomb is so important?

What you have on Easter is not just a new energy source that entered the world, of hope and faith and the Easter faith of the church. No, what you have is Jesus Christ who is alive on Easter morning. It's Jesus Christ who you have in your life. It's Jesus Christ in your life that is the most fundamental thing about the Christian faith, and everything else is secondary. There are some wonderful secondary things, I know, but they're all secondary to knowing Christ.

IX.

Do you know Christ? Today is a good day to trust him with your life, to know him personally. He's the source, and he tells a parable to his disciples in which he invites the disciples to abide in him. What a tremendous invitation.

Jesus Christ promised, "When two or three gather in my name, I will be in the midst of them." Christ is here. And the most profound mystery of all is that he wants to give you more than just energy or power or anything else; he wants to give you himself.

X.

Jesus has wonderfully simplified our lives. He bids us to concentrate with a single focus on our relationship with him. And then all the other things take care of themselves.

Jesus takes a symbol of the disciples' lives, those grapevines up on that wall, and reinterprets them for the disciples. He takes something common and ordinary and shows how it can only make sense when it is connected to the source of life. And in that way he reinterprets the meaning of their lives for them.

XI.

That's why it's so important to have a regular time set aside in our days and weeks where we can meet the Christ who is alive in scripture. Pastor Emily gave us a 15-minute challenge last Sunday to spend fifteen minutes a day in God's word and in prayer. If that didn't work for you, try ten minutes a day, and build up from there.

XII.

I've been re-reading Thomas Merton's great spiritual classic, *The Seeds of Contemplation*, and in that book, he writes about the formation of our identities.

He argues that each of us has a choice about becoming real. Trees and animals, he says, don't have this choice. "God makes trees and animals without consulting them, and they are perfectly satisfied,"

But you and I are different, Merton goes on to say. Every one of us, because we are born into this world with the self-orientation of sin, is shadowed by an illusion that we can create our identities, a false self that seeks to exist outside of God's will and God's love.

Why? Because we like the idea that we're in control. We like the idea that we get to choose who we are, and what we're becoming without reference to anyone else but ourselves. Thus we use up our lives trying to accumulate pleasures and experiences and power and honor and love to clothe our false selves with something objectively real.

It's like that old TV show "The Invisible Man." So many of us are like him. We wind bandages around ourselves in order to believe that we're real. Our bandages are made of experiences, and pride, and pleasures, and egocentric desires that perpetuate our belief in our false selves. We act as if we can only become real when something visible covers the surface of our false selves that we've created in our minds and in our hearts.

But, what Jesus says in this parable of vine and branches, is that apart from him, there is no true substance under our bandages. Underneath the bandages of our of pleasures and ambitions, we are hollow. We may be able to see ourselves for a fleeting moment, but our bandages, because they are corruptible by their very natures, eventually will be destroyed. And when they are gone, there will be nothing left of us but our own nakedness and emptiness and hollowness, to tell us that we are mistakes.

XIII.

But there is a different way. And Jesus points that out to us in this parable of the vine and the branches. The secret of our identity is not a mistake and it's not invisible. It's real, and it's found in the love and mercy of God through Jesus Christ.

God gives us the freedom to be whatever we like, but he sends his Son so that we might choose to be engrafted into him and become what we're intended to be.

I love a line from C.S. Lewis, “when we are wholly his, we are more ourselves than ever before.”

And that’s what we offer back to God in quiet time. The self that God’s creates as we make our home in Christ, as we abide in him, and he abides in us. Amen.