

April 29, 2018  
**One Last I AM**  
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John 15:1-8

*[Jesus the True Vine]*

*15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2 He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3 You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in me as I abide 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. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6 Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.*

Our love for one another is the hard proof of God's presence in the world. "Our" refers to all human beings, not just the Christian ones, since all love is from God. Love refers to respectful, graceful, just regard and treatment of every human being – regard and treatment based not on what a human *deserves*, but that he *is*. God loves us, because we are God's. We love others, because they are God's.

As for proof – well, proof is what humanity is starved for, isn't it? Meaning. Purpose. Some sense of why we exist at all. We exist to love and to be loved. When we find ourselves loved – adored – by the Creator, the Sustainer, of the universe, our lives become a circuit of that love. Or a *circus*, which also works. As God is in us, so are we in the world, being love. We who have bound ourselves to Christ have made loving others the central purpose of our lives.

Such a life bears much fruit, Jesus said. If you can pick it, what fruit do you hope to bear? The fruit I hope to bear is joy. And peace. And justice. And decency, kindness and grace. I don't, mostly. Mostly I fail – because I'm slothful. And timid. And gluttonous. I suspect Jesus minds, a little. But not so much that he won't work with me, that he doesn't keep inviting me to try. The bit I know about this life convinces me that it's the trying that makes a life. And relationship with Christ is about the running, as Paul said, though I wish he'd been a knitter rather than an athlete.

That Christ is with us is what keeps us in the race, the fight, reaching for the prize. John 15 is smack-dab center of Jesus' farewell discourse: his most intimate conversation with his inner-circle disciples at the last supper, just before he's arrested. He's preparing

them, not just for his death, but for the new relationship to come: absent in the body, present in the Spirit. A relationship that will require new effort and intention from them. And faith. Lots and lots of faith. Bags and bags of faith. *Abide* is the word for such faith – here and all through John's writing, actually.

*<sup>4</sup> Abide in me as I abide 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. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup> 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.*

Lots and lots of *abiding*.

- Abide means “Stay.”
- Just stay.
- Don't go over there,
- or up there,
- or down there,
- or back there.
- Stay. Right. Here.

Stay in the loving, safe, all-knowing, ever-graceful presence of God. Stay here mentally. Stay here emotionally. Stay here physically. Stay here morally.

Here's the opposite of abiding: my phone chimes that I have a text. I'm driving, so I can't check it. Instead I take mental inventory of my six most important people and three most stressful projects. I conjure a possible disaster for each one of them. This takes five seconds, tops. Eventually I check the message – it's not a disaster, naturally. I spend another minute or two flogging myself mentally for being so dramatic. Then I go back to what I WAS doing before. Probably something like fretting about the Russia scandal or what a mess my house is. Or how many carbs I've already eaten that day.

All my life I've been told being Christian means praying a lot; giving my money and time and energy; feeling guilty for not giving away enough money, time or energy; going to church a lot. But hardly anybody ever talked about *abiding* a lot. And Jesus seems to be really big on it. He seems really big on us trusting him no matter what. Abide in me. Stay right here.

To have any hope of being the people who bear evidence of God's presence in this world, we must decide to abide in Christ. First and most of all, abiding is a work of heart and mind, a discipline that demands as much practice and self-denial as any athlete or artist perfecting her craft.

It takes a lifetime, even to begin: day in and day out, rejecting the world's terribly low standard for decency and mercy and justice; insisting to ourselves and to one another, as brothers and sisters in Christ, that God's expectation is entirely other and inevitably demands sacrifice.

Abiding begins quietly, seriously, deeply, with the decision to desire what Christ desires regardless of what our bodies or emotions ache for, day to day. Abiding is coming to terms with the fact that wanting what Christ wants doesn't come naturally just because we are His. It is learned, practiced, and prayed-for behavior.

Abiding is long and tedious and awkward. Sometimes scary. Sometimes boring. Sometimes hilarious. Sometimes fun. The company is usually good. Because abiding happens only inside relationship, in communion with God, in fellowship with each other.

Since January, I've fallen off the exercise wagon. Fortunately I landed in my recliner, so no one was injured. I love that we actually buy chairs called Lazy Boys; we don't even try to hide our slothfulness. But I'm back at it, after going in for what is called another "session for success." Like asking a professor to let you take her class over again and promising to do better. One change is that I have a new trainer, Brandon. Brandon is a quiet man who doesn't look super fit, just normal tall and lean. But he can do 1,000 burpees in an hour. Then, not only does he not die, he can finish his workday. He's patient as a saint and as attentive as a mother hen. He laughs at all my jokes, except the self-deprecating ones. He always encourages. He's always kind. He asks after my aches and pains.

He's really good to me, but only if I'm there. If I miss twice, he'll email me to see if I'm dead. But he doesn't come over. He doesn't drag me out of the Lazy Boy to drive me to the gym and puppet me through my workout. That would be creepy. And it wouldn't work; this body is my project. And so is my faith. As much as Jesus wants to love me, and love the world through me, without my volition – without my active, intentional participation – Jesus will wait. Or, more accurately, Jesus will go on without me until I'm ready.

Friends, either life with Christ is a life we want, or it isn't. We can pretend it's something less than Jesus demands, make it one of our interests like gardening and fitness and chickens. Jesus may even appear to abide our pretense. But either our lives bear the fruit of the Spirit or they don't. And if they don't, we aren't *useless* creatures. But neither are we the disciples Jesus was talking to in John 15. The ones who thought themselves devoted, called, willing to go the distance as his followers.

In that group, there wasn't room or time for deadweight. Jesus talks more than once of a pruning, purging and fire, always to promote greater and greater growth, more and more fruit; more grace, more justice; more joy, more peace. For lots of years I only heard

this text preached as judgment – against people who don't believe in Jesus – rather than the more plausible interpretation, which is that firewood is a natural consequence for dead branches. At least as firewood, dead branches are still useful. Is Jesus really judging or is he explaining how adult relationships work? Which is: *everyone* contributes; *everyone* puts in.

*I AM the vine* is Jesus seventh and last “I AM” statement in the gospel of John. We've been over nearly all the others since Christmas, two last week. Do you remember them?

I AM: The bread of life (chapter 6)

I AM: The light of the world (chapter 8)

I AM: The gate (chapter 10)

I AM: The good shepherd (chapter 10)

I AM: The resurrection and the life (chapter 11)

I AM: The way, the truth and the life (chapter 14)

I AM is the oldest and most important part of God's name for God's self since Moses. God's shameless, audacious, outrageous pursuit of us – *like a jilted husband chasing down a cheating wife* – is the picture painted by the prophet Hosea. Chasing humanity in hope we might know how completely and forever loved we have always been, by this one who calls themselves, I AM. Seven times Jesus reduces I AM to some smaller word we might understand: bread, light, gate, shepherd, vine, any one of which will do, so long as at least one of them snags one of us and we discover ourselves the beloved.

Once snagged, friends, by this love that never checks a resumé, that regards us worthy of grace, dignity, kindness and respect by virtue of our being-ness, by virtue of being God's, and the more of this goodness and grace that we soak up like vines soaking up sunshine and water, the more in love with humanity we will also fall; the less able we will be to tolerate the terror and injustice inflicted by our brothers on our sisters, by our sisters on our brothers, and by the systems of this world that enrich some by exploiting others.

Injustice and oppression: they ought to feel like injury or poison to the Spirit of God in us, injury that prompts change, treatment, healing: the activity of love in the world – that hard proof of God's presence, the purpose of our lives and our life together.