

Jesus the True Vine

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ²He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes^[a] to make it bear more fruit. ³You have already been cleansed^[b] by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴Abide 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. ⁵I 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. ⁶Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become^[c] my disciples.

God Is Love

⁷Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. ⁸Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. ⁹God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. ¹⁰In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. ¹¹Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. ¹²No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

¹³By this we know that we abide in him and he in us, because he has given us of his Spirit. ¹⁴And we have seen and do testify that the Father has sent his Son as the Savior of the world. ¹⁵God abides in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God, and they abide in God. ¹⁶So we have known and believe the love that God has for us.

God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.¹⁷Love has been perfected among us in this: that we may have boldness on the day of judgment, because as he is, so are we in this world. ¹⁸There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear; for fear has to do with punishment, and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love. ¹⁹We love^[a] because he first loved us. ²⁰Those who say, "I love God," and hate their brothers or sisters,^[b]are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister^[c] whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. ²¹The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters^[d] also.

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John 15:1-8; 1 John 4:7-21

Kerra Becker English

Abide in Me

Abide in me? What does that mean? Trust in me? Live in me? Make your home in me? Stay connected to me? Remain in me? Maybe it means all these things. Both passages we read today use this language of intimate connection via the word “abide.” And, scripture makes it clear that the connection runs in both directions. We abide in God, and God abides in us – especially as Jesus explains it through this image of branches connected to the one true vine.

There are both practical and mystical ways to look at this connection. Let’s take on the practical one first. “We love because God first loved us,” Soooo..., “Those who say they love God but hate their brothers and sisters are liars.” Well, that’s getting pretty real. I have to tell you, both of my parents were raised as only children. They honestly didn’t have a clue as to why my sister and I weren’t best friends growing up. They longed for a sibling connection, or at least thought they did. They didn’t get how trying it can be competing for the attention of Mom and Dad. They didn’t quite know what it was like to have such annoyance living in the bedroom right next door, or for some, in the bunk above or below. Perhaps the writer of first John could’ve used another analogy. Can’t we love God like we love a puppy, or like we love our best friends? Loving God isn’t the easy kind of love. It’s the hard kind.

I know that I’ve had moments of complete and utter exasperation with my sister – sometimes verging on hate. We may not hate our brothers and sisters quite as much as Joseph’s brothers hated him, but we hate that they think about things so differently, or that they do this

thing EXACTLY like Mom, or so unlike Dad. We hate that they got more attention, or better gifts, or that they don't call or that they always call at the wrong times. Whatever little thing bothers us about someone else - it's the absolute worst irritation when done by a sibling! Though I'm willing to share the frustration I've had with my sister, I know without a doubt that she could easily say the same about me. Long ago, as kids we had physical shoving matches, and a little less long ago, verbal shoving matches. But now that we are both mothers with kids of our own, much has mellowed, and I'm grateful for that. I've learned to love her for who she is - not who I wanted her to be - and I hope she's done much the same for me. Perhaps that is the point with God's love too. It can seem like the hardest kind of love, made harder yet because we can't really see it in action. How can we know it to be true?

Surely, my sister and I have always had love for one another, but has it always been apparent? Not really! I'm sure my mother and father wondered at times if we would ever be any kind of friends later in life. The same holds for my two kids now, and my best friend's five kids, and my nieces and my nephew. Family, in whatever configuration, is where we all start as human beings. Sometimes we're dealt a pretty good set from the start. Other times we learn how to love past the idiosyncrasies. And for unfortunately too large a number of persons, family was not a place to learn about love, and at best may be an opportunity to learn how to forgive terrible circumstances much later in life. The hate I'm talking about in my own family of origin was really superficial and petty. Now I see, that's a good thing. Sometimes there are really good reasons to set oneself apart from members of your own family.

So in trying to understand our relationship with God and how it works, we tend to make a practical start by thinking about parental love, or sibling love before we get to love of neighbors, or strangers, or even harder yet, the love of enemies. If you can't start with the practical ins and

outs, and ups and downs, of loving someone that you know – then loving God is going to be a big, big stretch. Love seems to be the prerequisite for relationships. And lack of love can be the destroyer of relationships for a long time to come.

So practically speaking – those who abide in Jesus are responsible for the never-ending work of loving other human beings. That means everything from caring for family and cherishing good friends, to doing the impossible work of listening to the tormented cries of Baltimore and mourning for the lost and dead in Nepal, and as best we can mending the relationships that we've had a part in breaking. There is no end to the work we can do. Brett, as he leaves us and prepares for his life as a Navy chaplain will encounter the many wounds that military personnel face on a daily basis – from hurts felt in childhood, to marriages strained by distance, to doubts about actions required of them. It's no easy task to love people who daily put themselves in stressful situations.

That's the hard truth of the kind of love God calls us to embody. But the blessing of this passage is that there is a mystical side of it. To bear the weight of love's demands can be overwhelming. How do we love so many broken people without breaking ourselves? We can only do so connected to the vine, woven into the fabric of God's care for us completed, as we know it, in Jesus Christ. Jesus abides in us so that we can truly live our lives in the very real presence of others. Cut off, we do become helpless and hopeless. As the Bible usually says, and we frequently misinterpret, this passage isn't about cutting off by having somehow missed the doctrinal point or by having doubts about who Jesus really is. This cutting off happens when we sever our ties with one another and break our connection to the spiritual life that unites all people in our common humanity. That's a different kind of thing. It allows us to feel the hurt behind the destruction in our nation's cities. It allows us to know that the people of Nepal are God's

children even as their beliefs vary greatly from our own. We abide in Christ, because the love of Christ CHOOSES to abide in us – to make a home in the human heart.

God may push us and prune us, but withering on the vine is something we do to ourselves. Love is what bears fruit. Lots of different kinds of fruit! I've often had those worries that because I felt "called" by God, that my calling was to do something dangerous and demanding – to lead protests, or battle poverty, or put myself in the middle of gangs to offer healing. I haven't dedicated my life to decades of ministry in the Congo, and I haven't saved any lives that I know of by approving food vouchers or packing a bag of non-perishables from a food pantry. In fact, sometimes I feel like I'm just puttering along in ministry and wonder if I've only got three measly grapes to show the vinegrower at the end. This passage isn't meant to offer that kind of judgment. Instead, I think it's meant to offer us consolation. When we abide in Jesus – anything we ask becomes God's work accomplished. Amazing isn't it? Ask for it and it will be done. Now, I have had that experience. I've understood that in conversations and wounds recognized, I've asked, God has given, and the proverbial fruit seems to appear. It takes us all. It isn't about the amazing accomplishments of our productive years that are the fruit. It can be the tender moments of children and the gentle kindness of older adults too.

"Abide in me," Jesus says, "As I abide in you." That mutual love is daily sustenance. It is the manna that provides nourishment and even joy in life itself. God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God – that means your brother, that means your sister too. Amen.

Communion

INVITATION TO THE TABLE:

BRETT: Because there is one loaf, we, many as we are, are one body; for it is one loaf of which we all partake. When we break the bread, is it not a sharing in the body of Christ?

KERRA: When we give thanks over the cup, is it not a sharing in the blood of Christ?

PRAYER OF GREAT THANKSGIVING:

Brett: The Lord be with you.

All: And also with you.

Kerra: Lift up your hearts.

All: We lift them to the Lord.

Brett: Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

All: It is right to give our thanks and praise.

Kerra:

It is truly right and our greatest joy
to give you thanks and praise,
O Lord our God, creator and ruler of the universe.
In your wisdom, you made all things
and sustain them by your power.
You formed us in your image,
setting us in this world to love and to serve you,
and to live in peace with your whole creation.
When we rebelled against you
refusing to trust and obey you,
you did not reject us,
but still claimed us as your own.
You sent prophets to call us back to your way.

Then in the fullness of time,
out of your great love for the world,
you sent your only Son to be one of us,
to redeem us and heal our brokenness.
Therefore we praise you,
joining our voices with choirs of angels,
with prophets, apostles, and martyrs,
and with all the faithful of every time and place,
who forever sing to the glory of your name:
**Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power and might,
heaven and earth are full of your glory.
Hosanna in the highest.
Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.
Hosanna in the highest.**

Brett: You are holy, O God of majesty,
and blessed is Jesus Christ, your Son, our Lord.
In Jesus, born of Mary, your Word became flesh
and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

He lived as one of us, knowing joy and sorrow.
He healed the sick,
fed the hungry,
opened blind eyes,
broke bread with outcasts and sinners,
and proclaimed the good news of your kingdom to the poor and needy.
Dying on the cross,
he gave himself for the life of the world.
Rising from the grave,
he won for us victory over death.
Seated at your right hand,
he leads us to eternal life.
We praise you that Christ now reigns with you in glory,
and will come again to make all things new.

Kerra: We give you thanks that the Lord Jesus, on the night before he died, took bread, and after giving thanks to you, he broke it, and gave it to his disciples, saying: Take, eat. This is my body, given for you. Do this in remembrance of me. In the same way he took the cup, saying: This cup is the new covenant sealed in my blood, shed for you for the forgiveness of sins. Whenever you drink it, do this in remembrance of me.

Brett: Remembering your gracious acts in Jesus Christ,
we take from your creation this bread and this wine
and joyfully celebrate his dying and rising,
as we await the day of his coming.
With thanksgiving, we offer our very selves to you
to be a living and holy sacrifice,
dedicated to your service.

Praise to you, Lord Jesus:
Dying you destroyed our death,
rising you restored our life.
Lord Jesus, come in glory.

Gracious God,
pour out your Holy Spirit upon us
and upon these your gifts of bread and wine,
that the bread we break
and the cup we bless
may be the communion of the body and blood of Christ.
By your Spirit make us one with Christ,
that we may be one with all who share this feast,

united in ministry in every place.
As this bread is Christ's body for us,
send us out to be the body of Christ in the world.

Kerra: Remember your church. . . .
Unite it in the truth of your Word
and empower it in ministry to the world.

Brett: Remember the world of nations. . . .
By your Spirit renew the face of the earth;
let peace and justice prevail.

Kerra: Remember our family and friends. . . .
Bless them and watch over them;
be gracious to them and give them peace.

Brett: Remember the sick and the suffering,
the aged and the dying. . . .
Encourage them and give them hope.
Rejoicing in the communion of saints,
we remember with thanksgiving
all your faithful servants, and those dear to us,
whom you have called from this life. . . .
We are grateful that for them death is no more,
nor is there sorrow, crying, or pain,
for the former things have passed away.

Kerra: In union with your church in heaven and on earth,
we pray, O God, that you will fulfill your eternal purpose
in us and in all the world.

Keep us faithful in your service
until Christ comes in final victory,
and we shall feast with all your saints
in the joy of your eternal realm.
Through Christ, with Christ, in Christ,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
all glory and honor are yours, almighty Father,
now and forever.

Our Father...

As God's own,
clothe yourselves with compassion,
kindness, and patience,
forgiving each other
as the Lord has forgiven you,
and crown all these things with love,
which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

May God bless you with discomfort
At easy answers, half-truths, and superficial relationships,
So that you may live deeply and from your heart.
May God bless you with anger
At injustice, oppression and the exploitation of people,
So that you may work for justice, freedom and peace.
May God bless you with tears
To shed for those who suffer pain, rejection, hunger, and war,
So that you may reach out your hand to comfort them
And turn their pain into joy.
And may God bless you with enough foolishness
To believe that you can make a difference in this old world,
So that you can do those things that others claim cannot be done.