

# I Am The Vine

John 15:1-11

**Call:** Isa 5:1-2c (NLT)

**Scripture:** John 15:1-11 (Jeremy dramatically reciting)

## I. Intro

How many of you know the name Polycarp? We've spoken of him many times from this pulpit. According to one early writer, Polycarp was a disciple of John. Jesus disciplined John and John disciplined Polycarp.

Around 155 AD, Roman authorities discovered the 86-year old Polycarp in an upper room, and dragged him into a stadium in Smyrna, Turkey. It was here where Polycarp would face either lions or a burning stake. And, from an eyewitness account, we read that the proconsul tried to persuade him to deny Christ saying, "Have respect for your old age and swear by the fortune of Caesar!"

Polycarp refused, so the proconsul urged him even stronger, "Swear and I will set you free! Reproach Christ!"

Polycarp then famously declared, "86 years have I served him. And, he never did me any wrong. How then can I blaspheme my Lord and my Savior?" Shortly after these words, the soldiers tied his hands behind his back and led Polycarp to the stake.

The martyrdom of Polycarp connects to the Gospel of John, and especially John chapter 15, which Jeremy just acted out. In this text, Jesus makes his final audacious "I am" statement of the Gospel, saying, *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit"* (John 15:5).

You may ask, how does Polycarp connect to John 15? Primarily it's his name. Although no one knows where Polycarp got his name, his name is a reminder of John 15. In Greek, "poly" means "much," and "carp" means "fruit." Every time his name was said, anyone within hearing distance would have thought of "bearing much fruit." And, of course, his story is still bearing much fruit, for the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.

So, for us today, what would it mean to be a "Polycarp," to bear much fruit? And, what fruit are we to bear? Oh and what does it mean to abide? These are the questions that will guide our study today as we look at this famous passage from John.

## Review

Well, last week, we ended chapter 14 of John where Jesus commanded us to not be anxious or afraid. He is going away, but in going away, he will send the paraclete who will be with us and

in us forever. He will take up permanent residence in us to teach us and remind us of all things Jesus. And, he will bring with him the peace of Jesus, the love of God and fearlessness.

Now as we come to chapter 15 and our famous text today, we must keep the Holy Spirit in mind, for the Holy Spirit lies behind everything Jesus says today, from bearing much fruit to abiding.

### **End of Chapter 14**

Before we get into our text today, I want to address a curious phrase which ended chapter 14. It says, *“Rise, let us go from here.”* No one really knows what this means, other than it appears Jesus and his disciples now leave the upper room and begin walking outside. So it appears from this point forward, they are walking through the streets of Jerusalem. And, perhaps as they are walking, they walk by a grapevine or even a sculptured grapevine. It is known that there was a large golden grapevine sculpture on one of the Temple doors. Could it be that he walks by that as he begins explaining his vine metaphor? It's speculation, but definitely a possibility?

So, let's jump into today's text. I invite you into John 15 where we'll begin with verses 1-3.

## **II. The Vineyard Described (15:1-3)**

*1 “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. 3 Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.” (ESV)*

### **A. “Bear”**

Let's note a few observations from these three verses. First of all, from the very beginning of Jesus' metaphor, much weight is given to the purpose for vines. What is the purpose? To bear much fruit, to be a Polycarp. Already in the first three verses, Jesus mentions bearing fruit three times. And, of course, this make sense. A vine is not there to look good. A vine is not there to look better than the next one. A vine has only one purpose – to produce grapes. Just like an orange tree is there to produce oranges and an avocado tree is there to produce avocados. Bearing fruit is absolutely key to our text.

### **B. “I AM”**

Secondly, in describing the vineyard, Jesus begins by saying, *“I am the true vine.”* He will later say simply, *“I am the vine.”* This is the 7<sup>th</sup> and final I AM statement with a predicate in this Gospel. And, as we come to this last one, I think it's helpful to see this one in light of all the others.

- Jesus is the vine, but the vine is also the bread of life. Bread is essential for life, so abiding in the vine is essential for life.
- The vine is also the light of the world. Light keeps us from walking in darkness, so abiding in the vine keeps us from walking in darkness.

- The vine is also the good shepherd. The good shepherd leads the sheep in love, kindness, grace and mercy, so abiding in the vine means to be led in love, kindness, grace and mercy.
- The vine is also the gate. The gate provides safety and security for the sheep, so abiding in the vine means we have safety and security.
- The vine is also the resurrection and the life. Abiding in the vine is to have resurrection life, a life which is no longer bound by death.
- And, the vine is the way, the truth and the life. Abiding in the vine is to be on the way which is the way of truth and the way of life.

Seven I AM statements culminating in *“I am the vine.”* And by seeing all seven through the vine imagery, we get a comprehensive picture not only of who Jesus is, but also of the extraordinary gifts he provides through abiding in him.

### C. The Old Testament Background

Jesus says, *“I am the vine.”* Now, as many of you know, this vine metaphor has a rich history in the Old Testament (ie. Psalm 80:8-11, Isaiah 5:1-7, Jeremiah 2:21, Hos 10:1 and Ezekiel 15:1-8). In fact, the vine is the most pervasive of all symbols for Israel. In most of the passages, we find the vine being highly favored and greatly cared for, yet also corrupt. In Isaiah, which we read for our Call to Worship, God *“looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only worthless fruit,”* literally “stinking” fruit (Isa 5:2). In Jeremiah, God says, *“I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt, wild vine?”* (Jer 2:21). Israel of old forgot that she didn’t exist for herself, but she existed to bear fruit in the world. So she only bore worthless fruit, “stinking” fruit. Isaiah goes on to list some of this fruit: injustice, greed, decadence and self-reliant wisdom. These are stinking, rotting and worthless fruit. So God, the great vinedresser, plants a new vine in the world.

### D. The Vine

Jesus is the new vine, and he is the true vine. The authentic vine. The genuine vine, which means there are no other vines. There is only one true vine. What God wanted his people to be, he now becomes himself. He is now the vine to bear that fruit in the world. And he calls us to be branches in him, and he in us, so that there will be fruit in the world. The Father really wants fruit in his world!

### E. The Branches

And, Jesus says we are the branches to bear that fruit. In these first three verses, Jesus describes three characteristics of us, the branches:

1. **We are “in Jesus.”** There is that blessed preposition again. Can you say it again with me? “In.” “In.” “In.” As a branch of the true vine, we are “in Jesus.”
2. **Secondly, we are “clean.”** Every branch that is bearing fruit will be cleaned in order to bear more fruit in the Father’s world.
3. **And, thirdly, we will bear fruit.** We will become Polycarps. That’s a promise.

Let's spend some time here, because according to the ESV, Jesus says in verse 2, that those branches *"in him that do not bear fruit will be **taken away**, and those that do bear fruit are **pruned** to bear more fruit."* So what does this terminology mean, "taken away" and "pruning"?

### **Taken away**

What does "taken away" mean, especially when the branch is "in Jesus"? Well, I don't think "take away" is the best translation here. The Greek word behind this phrase can mean "take away," but the primary meaning is to "lift up" or "take up." So in chapter 5, Jesus says to the lame man, "Take up your bed and walk." So, the lame man "took up his bed and walked." Here in chapter 15, the implication is that the branch is on the ground and needs to be lifted up, so that it can do what it's supposed to do – bear fruit. In other words, it's not removed from the vine! This branch is "in Jesus." It won't get discarded. It will be "lifted up" so it can bear fruit.

I've been told that according to experienced vinedressers, new branches in a vine are known to trail down and grow along the ground. But, they can't bear fruit down there because they get covered with dirt and mud, and eventually they'll get sick. So, what does an experienced vinedresser do? The vinedresser doesn't remove those new branches because those new branches are much too valuable for that! The vinedresser lifts them up, cleans them off, and ties them up off the ground so they can produce fruit.

So when the great vinedresser, the Father, sees a branch in the vine falling on the ground, the Father doesn't cut it off. That branch is far too valuable! That branch is in Jesus! So, what does the Father do? He lifts it up, cleans it off and enables it to bear fruit! He really wants fruit in his world! Now, later in this text, verse 6, which we will read in a moment, we do hear that those who are not in Jesus will be taken away and burned. In other words, it's possible to hang around the vine and not be in the vine. It's possible to be a regular church-goer, to serve at church, to be a pastor or elder, and yet not be in the vine. This is our warning. There will be judgment for those not in the vine, But, here in verse 2, they are in the vine, so they're lifted up and cleaned off which enables them to bear fruit.

Now this also means that those branches who are bearing fruit can join the father in his ministry of lifting up and caring for dirty, muddy branches. Those who are Polycarps can participate with the Father in his work. Sometimes, in our prideful brokenness, we're tempted to kick out those dirty branches or take them away or give up on them. But, no! This text teaches us that they're far too valuable to be removed! So, we can join the Father in lifting them up, so Jesus can wash them clean, then they'll bear fruit and flourish! After all, don't we all get dirty and muddy at times?

## Pruning

So what about pruning? Yikes! That doesn't sound like fun. That sounds painful. And, in a world that idolizes comfort at every level, pruning is not a welcome word. Difficulties and discomforts are not welcome in our lives. Yet, we don't get very far along the Jesus way before painful pruning begins to happen: sin, sorrow, sickness, suffering, loss, bereavement, disappointments and on it goes. But, in Hebrews 12, we discover that God disciplines us for our good, so that we may share in his holiness (Heb 12:10). Someone has said, "The gardener is never so close to the branch as when he's pruning it." So, don't worry about pruning. It's not a sign you're out. It's a sign you're in! The Father, the great vinedresser, is coming so close to you to get stuff out of the way so you can grow and bear fruit, so you can be a Polycarp.

So, what do we do? Let's hear Jesus' invitation in verses 4-11.

### III. The Invitation (15:4-11)

*4 Abide in me, and I in you. 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. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7 If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples. 9 As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Abide in my love. 10 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. 11 These things I have spoken to you, that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be full. (ESV)*

#### A. Abide

What is Jesus' invitation to us branches: "Abide in me." Jesus uses the word "abide" 10 times in these 8 verses alone. It's actually a key word in all of John's writings. Abide is a rich word meaning "to remain" or "to stay" or even to "make this your home," as the Message renders it. Make Jesus your home, the place where you're constantly returning to, the place where you stay overnight, where you are nourished, where you're safe and secure, where you're at rest, where you're loved. Abide in me Jesus says. In other words, don't just plug into Jesus on Sundays and unplug the rest of the week. Remain plugged in, connected to and attached to him continuously.

It's impossible to overstate the importance of this text for understanding the nature of our faith. Some commentators even read an urgency behind this invitation. "Hey branches! Abide in me, and make this your top priority in life!" Jesus is saying. If you are a Christian, this is your primary manner of existence. You make your home with Jesus. You develop your relationship with him. You yield to him. You rely on him. You abide in him. And, you remove all that hinders this relationship. This is urgent! This is what it means to be a Christian.

Last week, we talked about how the Spirit paraclete comes and brings us peace, love and fearlessness. And, I'm sure many of you were asking, "But what if I don't feel those things?" Hear Jesus' invitation, "Abide in me." If you don't feel the peace of Jesus, hear Jesus' invitation, "Abide in me." If you don't feel the love of Jesus, hear Jesus' invitation, "Abide in me." If you are afraid or anxious or struggling in life, hear Jesus' invitation, "Abide in me." And, you will bear much fruit. That's his promise.

And, it makes sense doesn't it? If the primary purpose of a vine is to bear fruit, this cannot happen unless the branch remains in the vine. The vine pours everything it has into the branches. It holds nothing back! And if a branch disconnects from the vine, it is nothing but a withered stick. It has no life. It has no fruitfulness in it. The branch can do nothing apart as a withered stick. It must remain in the vine. This of course signals a death blow to those of us who think we are strong and capable and self-sufficient. We are in fact nothing but a withered stick left to ourselves.

So, the two key questions which arise from this text are – "How do we abide?" and "What are the fruit?" Let's talk through these two questions.

## **B. How to Abide?**

How do we abide? How do we remain? There are all kinds of answers to this question. And, some of the specifics will depend on how we're wired. Some of us are visual and artistic. Some of us are cerebral and analytical. Some of us are introverts. Some of us are extroverts. Some of us love to read. Some of us don't. So, the specifics of abiding can look different in different people. But, I think there are some key ways that apply to all of us.

From this text particularly, we find two ways:

1. **Obedience:** We abide by obeying Jesus' commandments, verse 10. As Jesus obeys the Father, so we obey Jesus. And as Jesus demonstrates his love for the Father through obedience, so we demonstrate our love for Jesus through obedience.
2. **His Words:** We abide by his Words abiding in us, verse 7. Soak in his Words and you will be abiding in him.

If we open this up further to the entire Gospel of John, we find that John has told us throughout his Gospel how to abide by using this term in specific places.

1. **Prayer:** In chapter 1, two disciples use *abide* in a conversation with Jesus (John 1:38). How do we converse with Jesus now? We pray. So, when we pray, we abide in Jesus.
2. **Community:** In chapter 4, *abide* is used when the Samaritan woman evangelizes her community, and they invite Jesus to "abide" with them (John 4:40). We abide in Jesus when we are engaged and participate in his body, the church. So a little girl says to her mommy after church, "I love Jesus, but I want Jesus with skin on." That's the church! We are Jesus with skin on. Not that any one of us are Jesus, of course, it's just that we want to be like Jesus to one another.

For those on the livestream, if you are able, I want to encourage you to come out and engage in our community here. And, if you do, you will be abiding in Jesus.

3. **Communion:** In chapter 6, Jesus says, “*Whoever feeds on my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me, and I in him*” (John 6:56). We abide in Jesus when we take communion. Communion must be a regular event for followers of Jesus because it is a way of abiding in him.

So, those are 5 ways of abiding. However, I want to draw your attention to one more: **Watch Jesus**. Watch Jesus abide in the Father. Soak in the Gospels and watch how he does this. He lives in such intimacy with the Father that he knows what to say and what to do. Throughout John, Jesus has said, “I only say what I hear my father saying and I only do what I see him doing.” So, we watch Jesus and learn from him as he abides with the Father.

So, those are six ways to abide. As I said there are many, many more, but those are six primary ways to abide so that we will bear fruit.

### C. What is the Fruit?

So, what is the fruit? Well, maybe this little saying will help: Grapevines bear grapes. Orange trees bear oranges. Avocado trees bear avocados. So, the Jesus vine bears what? Jesus. The life, the character and the deeds of Jesus. That’s fundamentally what the fruit is.

But from this text, we get three specific fruits of the Jesus vine:

- **Love:** The clearest sign we are abiding in the vine is that we love one another just as Jesus loves us.
- **Joy:** When we abide, we have joy. Joy is an unmistakable sign of abiding. As Jesus delights in abiding with his Father, so we delight in abiding with Jesus. And, joylessness might be a sign that a branch needs to be lifted up out of the mud and washed.
- **Realized Prayer:** In verse 7, Jesus says that for those who abide in him, they can ask whatever they wish and it will be done. As we said in chapter 14, realized prayer is a common theme throughout this discourse. Does Jesus mean that when we are abiding, whatever we ask for will be given to us? I don’t know about you, but if that’s what it means, that’s not my experience. Here are some more thoughts around this difficult theme. I think it means that as we abide in him, we begin wishing for what he wishes. We begin desiring what he desires, and the more we abide in him, our prayers are shaped by that abiding. Then our prayers become consistent with him and his desires. His *will* slowly becomes our *will*. After all, grape branches wish for grapes. Orange branches wish for oranges. Avocado branches wish for avocados. And Jesus branches wish for Jesus’ wishes.

Those are three specific fruits from this text. What might be some other fruits of abiding? If we look beyond the immediate context here, we find other fruits of abiding.

- From the entire Gospel of John, we find things like living in the light, walking in freedom from sin to love, and worshiping in Spirit and Truth.

- From the other Gospels, we find descriptions of life within the kingdom of God. So Matthew's Sermon on the Mount is an example. Even at the end of the Sermon, Jesus says you will know healthy and diseased trees by their fruit, fruit that is described in the rest of the sermon. Particularly, the Beatitudes are fruit born of abiding. Becoming poor in spirit, becoming meek, becoming merciful, becoming a peacemaker, etc.
- From the rest of the New Testament, we find things like the fruit of the spirit which are the character traits of Jesus: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. These things begin to emerge in us as we abide in Jesus.

And, it is through all of these fruit that the Father is glorified, because the father really wants fruit in his world.

#### **D. Fruit Grows Naturally**

Now, at this point, I think it's helpful to note that when we walk by grapevines, we never hear them grunting or groaning to produce grapes. Do we? Grapevines don't have to grunt to make grapes, they come naturally, as long as the branches are well-connected to the vine.

So, if we branches stay well-connected to Jesus and abide in him, fruit will come naturally. It does take time, but fruit will happen, as long as we make our home with Jesus.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." He it is that becomes a Polycarp! The Father really wants fruit in his world. So, abide in Jesus! This is urgent! Make this your top priority. And, watch that fruit grow! Amen!

#### **Benediction**

Now receive this benediction:

This week,

May the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ

Fill you with his Spirit

So that you may abide in Jesus

As he, the lover of your soul, abides in you.

And watch the fruit grow

For he wants fruit in his world,

And He is faithful and he will bring it to pass.

That's a promise.

Amen.

## **Resources**

Burge, Gary, *The Anointed Community*

Carson, Don, *The Farewell Discourse and Final Prayer of Jesus*

Johnson, Darrell, *Preaching the Gospel According to John* (Regent College Course)

Klink, Edward, *John* (Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the NT)

Newbigin, Leslie, *The Light Has Come*