

"REMAIN IN ME, AND I WILL REMAIN IN YOU"

SERIES: GREAT TRUTHS RECONSIDERED

by Steve Zeisler

Last year Doug Goins and I were working together on plans for the 50th anniversary of this church, and both of us realized that we've lived through a lot of PBC's history. Doug and I have each been here for more than twenty years. As we talked, we realized how much we value things we have been taught and have had modeled here over the years—outlook, theology, ministry priorities—things that have been characteristic of PBC during its 50 years. So we decided it would be good in our 51st year to reflect on lessons that we've learned. We've each picked out some of these, and we're going to highlight them in a joint series of topical messages.

In this first message we're going to look at Jesus' wonderful insistence that life cannot be lived apart from him in John 15. His illustration of the vine and the branches, the bearing of fruit, is part of a passage that is sometimes called the Upper Room Discourse or the Farewell Discourse, John 13-17. This concentrated instruction from our Lord begins with the Passover meal in the upper room and extends through Jesus' high-priestly prayer in John 17. John Stott, the great English Bible teacher, called John 13-17 the holy of holies in the Bible.

If Jesus had been a modern man, instead of using the illustration of the vine and the branches, he might have said something like, "You are the appliance and I am the generator." Perhaps electricity would have been the motif he used to teach. But of course he lived in an agricultural society, and he used an agricultural illustration to talk about the believer's dependence on and unity with the Lord.

The teaching of John 15 takes place just as Jesus and the disciples (now minus Judas) departed from the upper room where they had shared the famous final supper in which Jesus demonstrated his servant heart by washing their feet. He also told them about his departure; he would leave them, and where he was going, they could not come. They trembled at what he said and didn't want to believe it. He said, "I will send you another Comforter, another Companion as God's presence in your life," describing the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Through all these troubling words, the disciples found themselves confused. They had loved him as their Lord and teacher who had walked through Galilee with them, who had been their companion in Jerusalem and Judea, who had challenged phoniness and lived the truth. They had had years together with him that meant everything to them, and now it had come to an end.

It was Passover night, and the moon would have been full. The last statement of John 14 is this: "Come now; let us leave." Having finished the supper, they got up and began to walk out. They came down the hill south of the temple, crossed over the Kidron Valley, and ascended the Mount of Olives to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus would finally be arrested and taken off to be crucified. As they went, I imagine they passed a vine. At one of the homes they were walking past there may have been a trellis with grapes growing on it, or they may have passed a little vineyard. Perhaps Jesus stopped and touched a branch or pointed to one as he began to tell them how to live in the age in which he would depart from them. "I'm leaving, and you cannot come where I'm going. I'm going to send another Comforter to meet your needs, and I will come again. In the age of the Spirit, until I come again, how are you going to make your way? How are you going to understand what it means to not only survive but thrive as a faithful disciple?" So he taught them with this illustration in John 15:1-11:

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

"I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

"As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have obeyed my Father's commands and remain in his love. I

have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete."

There are depths to what Jesus is saying here that we would not get to if we spent a year meditating on this. Just these eleven verses will repay frequent meditation. But the outline of what Jesus is saying is quickly discerned. A branch needs to be connected to the vine in order for fruit to be produced. We need to remain in vital connection with Jesus in order for our lives to be what they ought to be. The basic insight is not hard to understand, and that's what we want to consider in this message.

Encouragement for those who remain in Jesus

Another observation before we look at the verses themselves is that this teaching is essentially hopeful. There are clearly choices to be made; verse 5 says, "...Apart from me you can do nothing." So the challenge is laid before us: "Don't try to make it on your own. Don't imagine that all your effort, or Christian concentration on becoming godly in your own strength, will amount to anything. It won't." But this passage is not primarily a warning. It is not a threat, "Be fruitful or else," although some have taught it that way. Verse 2 refers to branches that are taken away, and verse 6 to withered branches that are gathered up and burned. Some people focus on those elements and essentially sound not just a challenge but an alarm: "Be fruitful, serious, faithful, committed; there are dire consequences if you don't!"

But that isn't the tone at all of what Jesus is saying. Look at verse 11. Why did he say these things? "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and your joy may be complete." Verse 9: "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love." His clear sense is that the people hearing his words do not need to worry about withering and dying and separation and so on. He expects them to remain committed, and he is just encouraging them that this is the best kind of life to live, the life that results in fullness of joy. This is the embrace of our Lord. "I have been loved by God; let me love you in turn."

I think the statement in verse 2 about branches that are cut off by God is a reference to Judas. He had just been in the upper room. It says Satan entered him and he went out and betrayed his Lord unto death (John 13:21-30). There are some who are part of a circle of believing people who have never been vitally connected to Christ.

In verse 6, Jesus is not threatening hellfire. It's not that such people should be burned in awful, eternal torment of the fires of hell. What he is saying is this: "If you determine to go your own way, if you choose something other than an intimate, vital relationship with me, your life will be worthless." The point is not punishment, it's uselessness. You won't amount to anything. The branch of a vine is soft wood. You can't build anything with it. It has no value at all except to produce fruit. If a branch is disconnected, it should be dispensed with and forgotten.

Are you going to wake up someday and realize that you've amounted to nothing? Psalm 1 talks about a tree planted by streams of water that bears fruit in season, and it describes the alternative: chaff (the husks left behind after the grain has been trod out), which blows away and is forgotten.

The explosion of information about sports is crazy. There is more information than you would ever want to know about the 49ers' place-kicker and his hurt heel. You could find out the life story of the backup tackle for the 49ers somewhere on the Internet. There are sports-talk radio shows that analyze every player in every game, down to the water boy.

But you won't find any information about the overpriced free agent who was signed in the spring and cut in August. Maybe he's making a million dollars in the stock market, or maybe he's driving a beer truck. Nobody knows or cares, because he didn't stay the course.

That's the point Jesus is making here. Regardless of their life circumstances, the ones who are the focus of the heart and concern of God here are the ones who remain in Jesus and bear fruit. He is encouraging us. The concern of the Lord is for our joy.

The true vine

Let's look at the text then, and consider some of what Jesus is teaching. First of all, he says in the very first phrase of verse 1, "I am the true vine...." There are alternative vines. Israel was called the vine, the luxuriant planting of the Lord (Hosea 10:1). But at the time of Jesus faithless Israel had become a spurious vine, not a source of life. There was a great golden vine on the front of the holy place where the people would enter the temple, a symbol of Israel. But they had lost their way, stopped listening, rejected their Messiah.

Every one of us was made to be a branch. That is the human condition. The clusters that grow in your life will be unique to you. The bends in your life are different from others, the gnarls happen at different places. You may be higher on the vine or lower. But every one of us is dependent on life from somewhere else. We cannot generate what we need by ourselves. All of us will attach ourselves to something else as a source of life. And what Jesus said was, "I am the true vine, the one who gives

life, the one real source of nutrition, the one who produces real fruit."

Think of false alternatives today. We can imagine that politics or government might seem life-giving; there are people who give themselves to political change. When I was in college I had friends who were very serious Marxists. They were sure that the tide of the future was with Marxist thinking. They had attached themselves to Marxism as a source of life, to change the world and establish justice. Others, in the earliest days of personal computing, hoped that technology was a reliable source of meaning and fulfillment. Celebrities, investment schemes, new religions can appear to offer us what we need.

None of these is the true vine. The faithless religion of the Jews was not the true vine, and neither is any other religion. Jesus starts this off by saying, "I am the true vine. I'm the one genuine source of life for human hearts."

"You in me and I in you"

Secondly, he insists that the life of a branch is best expressed by the Greek word *meno*, which is translated either "abide" or "remain." It's used many times in these eleven verses. Verse 4: "Remain in me, and I will remain in you." Verse 7: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish...." Verse 10: "If you obey my commands, you will remain in my love...." This is the idea of making a commitment to stay with something over the long haul, to settle down, to keep on.

There are two directions in which this keeping on should take place. First, Jesus said, "I remain in you. I have taken up residence in your life. I've come near to you. I've chosen you. I'm committed to you. I've died for you. I love you." What can you do that will break that relationship? What sin can you commit that will drive him away? Where can you go that he doesn't go with you? What awful thought can you think that will make him run screaming from your presence? There is none.

There is an important passive side to this remaining. We let him love us, believe in his embrace, stop trying to earn his love or change or validate ourselves in his presence. We accept something that's already true, settle down, breathe a sigh of relief, and say, "Abba, Father," smiling for no reason but his presence in our lives. He remains in us, and we are the passive recipients of the grace of God. We cannot earn it, change it, or ruin it.

But the other direction of this keeping on is active: "Remain in me as I remain in you. Choose to hold tight. Give priority to the things that matter to me. Listen carefully. Obey. Make choices." Do you want to be more a woman or a man of prayer? Do it, persevere. Do you want to join a small group that offers close and honest fellowship? Make time for it. Take the steps that you need to take. If God has stirred in you a desire to use spiritual gifts that he's given you, don't hesitate. It's time to admit whatever sinful pattern you're in and break it. It's time to fight back against temptation. Whatever it is that you need to do to remain in him, now is the time. We are both recipients and activists in this business of intimacy with Christ. The branch receives life from the vine, and the branch draws nutrition from the vine.

I got a Palm Pilot this year. I (thought it would organize my life, but my lack of organization has just carried over into another piece of technology. Technology does nothing for character.) A Palm Pilot is a hand-held computer. It sits in a little cradle that's plugged into the desk top computer. The two devices relay information back and forth. I was sitting at my desk the other day trying to think about "you in me and I in you," this mutual remaining, in which the vine gives life to the branch, and the branch expresses itself drawing on the vine. I pressed a button that initiates this information transfer, and little arrows appeared, red going one direction and blue the other. It reminded me of what Jesus is trying to say here, that there is a two-way passing of life, his giving us and being for us everything we need, and our expressing back to him love and commitment to him, holding on to him, offering him what we have, expressing our needs and confusions and hurts and fears and hopes. Each of us remains in the other.

A fruitful life

The last question we might ask is, fruit comes from the branch that remains in the vine, but what is a fruitful human life like? In the case of Israel the vine, there are a number of passages in the prophets where Israel is called to be a nation that is just and righteous and faithful and worshipful, a people different from all the other nations of earth because their national life is centered on the Lord their God. Jesus is the true vine, and his followers have the same calling to be men and women of justice, righteousness, worship, mercy, and kindness; to be centered on the Lord our God, different from those around us. That's fruit-bearing.

But there is an even closer reference in verse 7: "If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." Fruit-bearing is having a life of prayer in which we find ourselves asking for the very things that God is doing, in which we have been so changed by the words of the Lord as we've learned, listened, meditated, remained, and walked in them that everything we think to ask is the very thing that God is committed to doing. Whatever we ask we receive because we are asking according to the will of God. We are fruitful people who have been changed by the word of God so that our prayers are filled with who he is, where he's going, and what he's doing. We become people whose prayer

lives are vital, speaking about the things that God is doing and hearing back from him.

In some ways verse 7 is the opposite of verse 2, "...Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful." He clips away elements in our lives often through suffering and loss. Earlier, Jim Christenson stood in our sharing time and said, "This is the most spiritual Christmas I've ever had. Every year I wanted a quiet Christmas. Every year I wanted to spend time with the Lord. Every year I wanted to get out of the rat race. It was the most spiritual Christmas I've ever had because I got sick." He was in the hospital and later convalesced at home. And he was giving thanks to God because he had finally gotten out of all the craziness, all the temptations, all the demands, and had spent time with the Lord by being pruned in illness. That's what pruning is, and that pruning is what ultimately makes us fruitful. But as I said, in some ways verse 7 is the opposite. He adds to our lives instead of taking away because we ask for what is best.

Consider verse 8: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." A life that glorifies God, so that others believe him to be greater than they ever did before is a fruitful life. You don't live like everybody else does; you have different priorities. You're disciples of Jesus, and you are proved to be his disciples by the fact that your life is fruitful. And praise is given to God, not the branch on which the fruit is growing.

A way to live that is like no other

Verses 9-11 are about love. Jesus was loved by God the Father and lived in his love. He loves us and offers that we may live in his love. The passage ends, as we've already said, with his commitment to our joy. "I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete." The disciples were confused and frightened. They hated everything he was saying-he was leaving, he would die. Judas had departed, there were soldiers on the way, it was dark. He said at the beginning of chapter 14, "Do not let your hearts be troubled." Their hearts were terrified. This was the most awful of nights, and it was going to get worse. And yet Jesus boldly offered a way to live that is like no other: a life filled with joy, a life certain of the tender love of God. We are connected to Jesus in a way that changes everything else about us. We took our Christmas tree down last week. It had been up for most of the month of December. The tree had been dead the whole time, of course, but it had ornaments on it, and from a distance they might have looked like fruit. But it wasn't the real thing.

That's one of the reasons I'm thankful to have been taught the Christian life here, coming back to the theme of this series. What I learned of the Christian faith at PBC over the years is that if it doesn't come from the inside, if it's not produced by the Lord, it doesn't matter how impressive a splash it makes in a shallow and short-lived sense. I appreciate having grown up in a place where the folks I looked up to pursued a vital connection to Christ, remaining in him and he in them. They obeyed him because they loved him. Their prayers were answered because they were shaped by his word, men and women of joy.

So I commend to each of us, as we begin the new year, the words of Jesus his disciples: "Remain in me, as I remain in you. I am the vine, you are the branches. You were intended for fruitfulness."

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