

## “The True Vine”

John15: 1-8

After a few weeks of special Sundays, we pick back up with our regular service. This Sunday, we hear Jesus share the seventh and the last of the “I Am” statements. You know, I am the Bread of Life, I am the Light of the World, I am the Gate, I am the Good Shepherd, I am the Resurrection and the Life, I am the Way, the Truth and the Life, and lastly, I am the True Vine. I thought I would share all of them with you this morning just in case you ever go on Jeopardy and this happens to be the final round question. If this happens, and you win, just remember the church gets 10 percent.

These “I Am” Statements begin in Chapter 6 in the Gospel of John and continue through Chapter 15. For John’s readers and hopefully for us, when we hear these “I Am” statements, we remember the story of Moses talking with God following the burning bush incident. In that story, God tells Moses to go and set God’s people free. Moses looks around, wondering who God is talking to in that moment, thinking surely God is not talking to him. This back and forth goes on for a while until Moses finally asks THE question. Moses asks God when the people want to know who sent me, what name should I give them?

Now God's response to this question is brilliant. God simply says, "I AM WHO I Am" or better translated, "I Will be who I will Be". In this exchange between Moses and God, by saying the name in this way, God gives a promise to God's people. The promise is that God is and will be all we ever need. This promise is the basis for all of Jesus' "I Am" statements.

In the Gospel of John, whenever Jesus says one of these "I AM" Statements, he is building on this one moment in Israelites' history. Through these statements, Jesus once again says to the people God is and will be all we ever need. Jesus uses these "I Am" statements to remind them that the Word is Made flesh in and among the people, connecting them once more to the larger narrative of God's saving love and grace. The promise is there, just like it has always been. The question now becomes how will the people respond to the promise? How will the promise become a part of who we are as Jesus' disciples in this new reality following the resurrection?

This question brings us to our text today. At first glance, this passage seems rather harsh with all this talk about pruning and trimming, with all this talk about being dried up and tossed away. At first glance with all this talk of being burned in fire, this passage does not seem very hopeful or helpful. Instead, it seems to be leaning more towards divine judgement rather than divine grace and love, something which goes against everything we know and have experienced about our

God. So there must be something more going on in this passage than what we assumed at first glance.

Here's why I say this: Although we freely admit that yes there are judgement passages within our sacred text, this doesn't seem to be what's going on here in this passage. It is not like those other passages, you know the ones that have John the Baptist calling everyone broods of vipers, the ones which tell us those who will be judged will be thrown into the outer darkness where there will wailing and gnashing of teeth. None of that "judgement" talk is happening here in these verses. So if all this talk about pruning and trimming is not about judgement, then what is it all about?

The first clue comes to us through this word, "abide". The author of John uses "abide" 9 times in just eight verses. He uses it 40 times in his whole gospel. This is a pretty big clue as to what John is really concerned about when he writes his Gospel. John knows that "when communities of faith forget their mission to show their attachment, their connection, their very understanding of who Jesus is as their source of life, if and when communities of faith forget this, we simply become another institution that accommodates the world rather than transforming it." Let me say that again: When communities of faith forget our connection to Jesus Christ, we become another institution that accommodates the world rather than transform it. When this happens, we become empty shells of ourselves and in

no way reflect the light of the Kingdom of God. By forgetting our connection to Jesus as communities of faith, as Jesus' disciples, when we ignore our source of life, we become dried up branches, disconnected from the True Vine.

What John does in this passage is to invite us to consider how we will live our lives as Jesus' disciples in this new reality following the resurrection. Knowing that we have this promise, a promise given to us by a God who loves us more than we can ever imagine, as Jesus' disciples, how will we stay connected to and centered in our source of life? These words of pruning and trimming, taken now in the context of God's promise to God's people, become a call. They become a call to take our relationship with God, our relationship with one another seriously. These words now become a call to let go of all the stuff which prevents us from becoming the people God created and calls us to be, to let go of the stuff that disconnects us from the vine... stuff like hate and hurt, stuff like unhealthy relationships, stuff like holding onto the past while ignoring the possibilities of new life right here in our midst.

John's words of pruning and trimming, as painful and as difficult as they may be to live out, John's words become an invitation to embrace who we are and whose we are because....they remind us of the "intimate interdependence between God and us. [They remind us that] while God's existence doesn't depend on our fruitfulness, our bearing fruit, our becoming whole enhances God's life and

mission in the world. [Our staying connected to our source of life makes the Kingdom of God real in this world for us and for so many others.] In tending to the branches –[tending to our own branch and tending to the branches of others – we experience the privilege of sharing] in God’s healing presence in the world. [By staying connected to the True Vine, we advance God’s vision of reconciliation in our time, here and now for all of God’s children.

Or let me say it another way...This past week, I was meeting someone about things going in our community. This person mentioned that there seems to be some really amazing stuff happening around Midway Christian Church, stuff that just a few years ago didn’t seem like a possibility. This person asked me what our secret was. Now I will admit there are moments in ministry when you have all the answers. This was not one of those moments.

What I was able to tell this person was the truth. I simply shared that this process of transformation didn’t happen overnight nor was it finished. Each and every day brings new surprises, new frustrations, new hopes, and yes new questions for us as a community of faith. I also shared that as painful as it was at some times, we realized as a community of faith, we needed to have some hard conversations, conversations which we had been putting off for years. We realized that we had to let go of this thought of if only we could recapture the glory days,

then everything would be okay. We had to let go of this idea that our purpose and mission was and is to reclaim being that church we were back then.

During the course of the conversation, I also shared with this person that we as a community faith had to reconnect with our source of life. We had to do this not only as a community but as individuals as well. I shared with this person that by no means do we have it all figured out, but...for me, and for our members, there is joy in serving in ministry here. There is life in this community again. I shared that in the midst of all this new life and possibilities, the lesson I am now trying to learn is to how to get out of the way so that the seeds of new life can come to fruition without me disrupting what God is already doing here in and among Midway Christian Church.

To be honest, I thought I gave a pretty good preacher explanation to a pretty difficult question, a question that so many communities of faith are now struggling to answer. But this person just sat there in silence for a bit, staring at me. Finally this person responded. The response was “Well, that’s all well and good but that wasn’t what I was really looking for. I was really just looking for a quick fix, something that would allow my church to not have to deal with all that hard stuff, you know sort of like a 5 easy steps to church, you know 5 easy steps to transformation and new life for congregations.”

That conversation happened on Monday. Then, later on this week, I talked to the same person again, only to discover, that this person's church had decided to close its doors. That community of faith just couldn't see a future ahead for it anymore.

Then the person said something amazing to me. This person said, "You know, it always did feel like something was missing from our community of faith. I'm not exactly what it was but I bet if we could have just figured out what it was, we might still have had our church open today."

In that moment, it was almost as if I could hear this last and final I Am statement being spoken, telling us all "I Am the True Vine. My Father, the Vine Keeper. God removes any of my branches that don't produce fruit, and he trims any branch that produces fruit so that it will produce even more fruit. <sup>3</sup> You are already trimmed because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, and I will remain in you. A branch can't produce fruit by itself, but must remain in the vine. Likewise, you can't produce fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, then you will produce much fruit. Without me, you cannot do anything." Amen.