



“The True Vine and the Bread of Life”

Exodus 16:1-5; John 6:35-40; Isaiah 5:1-4; John 15:1-12
“We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life.”

from the Nicene Creed

In this series, *The Christ*, we turn to two of Jesus’ “I am” statements in John’s gospel. As we’ve seen, these statements, grounded in the Hebrew Bible, are clear and unmistakable claims to Jesus’ genuine divinity. Thus, I’ve included Old Testament references in the Scripture passages above.

“I am the bread of life.”

More than 3,000 years ago, the Hebrew slaves who escaped from Pharaoh faced a more pressing problem of nourishment: starvation. The problem was that there just hadn’t been much time to pack. When Moses said go, everyone had simply dashed for the Red Sea. They somehow found the time to plunder the Egyptians, grabbing jewelry and clothing, but they had not prepared any food provisions other than some loaves of unleavened bread.¹ When the Hebrew slaves reached the safety of the Sinai wilderness, they realized that choosing gold over food had perhaps not been the best decision and they began to complain, “you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger” (Exodus 16:3). But of course, they were completely wrong. They were God’s people and God would provide for them. Soon, God began raining “manna” upon them, the “bread from heaven,” a flakey, nutritious substance that could be gathered off the ground each morning. When the sun grew hot this bread from heaven melted, but there was no need to store any food. God provided them with fresh manna every day. A powerful reminder that God provides every day.

More than a millennia later, descendants of these Hebrew slaves gathered along the shoreline of the Sea of Galilee anxious to see the miracle-working teacher named Jesus. It was a crowd of thousands and Jesus asked one of his disciples, Philip, where they could buy bread for everyone to eat. They would surely need nourishment as the day wore on. [It will help to have your Bible open to John 6 as you read the rest of this study.]

Philip told Jesus that feeding the crowd would take far more money than any of them had. But a boy came forward with a few loaves and a few fish. Jesus told everyone to sit, gave thanks for the food, and then gave it to be distributed to everyone – and a few loaves became enough to feed thousands.

Jesus, realizing that the crowd would demand more from him, went up a nearby mountain and later that night, made his way back across the Sea of Galilee to Capernaum – by foot!

The next day, the crowd finds Jesus again and he tells them that they only followed him because of the previous day’s miracle. And then, he tries to take them to a whole new place. Jesus tells them that he can do better than some loaves of bread that will grow stale and old anyway, he can offer them “the food that endures for eternal life,” namely himself, “for it is on [Jesus] that God the Father has set his seal” (John 6:27).

Now, I’m sure that the folks on the seashore that day were confused and mystified at this, but like the Samaritan woman at the well (see John 4), they want what they think Jesus is selling. She wanted “living water” so that she wouldn’t have to make the trek to Jacob’s well anymore, and the crowd is surely hoping for a lifetime bread supply. All they want to know is what work they have to do to get such bread. Jesus replies that they must simply “believe in him whom he [God the Father] has sent” (6:29).

¹ The bread they take is unleavened because there was not even enough time to wait for the bread to rise.

Naturally, they expect something akin to what God provided to their ancestors, bread falling from heaven . But that isn't what Jesus is talking about at all, for the manna, though God-sent, was not the "true bread of heaven . . . that gives life to the world."

"I am the bread of life"

The crowds are still waiting to get their bellies filled when Jesus declares to them, "I am the bread of life." Jesus himself is the nourishment needed for eternal life. This is the first of seven profound moments in John's Gospel when Jesus declares "I am the . . ." Why seven? Because it is the number which signified wholeness and completeness; God created the cosmos in seven days. Why is the "I am" significant? Because it is the name of God given to Moses at the burning bush (see Exodus 3).²

This simple statement had to rock the crowd back on its heels. Jesus, this man from Nazareth, is the bread from heaven, he says, sent by God the Father, so that who believes in him may have eternal life. Jesus is the nourishment, the bread, that sustains eternal life, which neither hunger nor thirst can touch. Further, it is Jesus who will raise the dead on the last day!

Let's be clear here: Jesus is claiming to be much more than the miraculous manna of the Exodus. The path to eternal life lies through him. He will do what only God can do – resurrect the dead. To some, even many, who listened this must have seemed blasphemous. Little wonder that Jesus' claims drew quick opposition (v. 41-42).

But Jesus is not through. He is the bread of life, the nourishment needed for eternal life. "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh" (v. 51). And so Jesus brings the crowd to the cross and to the deep mystery of his body and his blood. "Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood have eternal life, and I will raise them up on the last day . . . those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide³ in me , and I in them."

One can't miss the sacramental language here, speaking to the deep mystery of what we call Holy Communion. These words help us to understand why most Christians have seen Holy Communion as more than a mere remembrance of Christ's sacrifice. Instead, we embrace that in the bread and the cup, Christ is present. It is the bread of heaven, Jesus the Christ, who nourishes us for eternal life, who will sustain our resurrected bodies. The only question for us is this: Will we trust Jesus?

"I am the true vine."

The vineyard

Jesus' hour has finally arrived and he tries to help his disciples understand what is about to happen. With the seemingly simple statement, "I am the true vine . . .," Jesus draws upon the much-used metaphor of the vineyard.

Israel is a land of vineyards, thus we shouldn't be surprised that it is a common biblical metaphor (see Isaiah 5:1-4, Psalm 80:8-9; Genesis 49:11-12,22 for example). The metaphor usually works like this. God plucked the people out of Egypt and planted them in Canaan, There, they, the vineyard, were to be fruitful and grow, but the vineyard turned bad (as in today's passage from Isaiah) and God will come to judge and destroy the vineyard. But, as always, there are images of restoration and blessing alongside the images of judgment and destruction. In these images, the fertile vineyard is the blessed and restored Israel (Jeremiah 31:5; Amos 9:14).

² On seven other occasions in John's gospel, Jesus makes absolute "I AM" declarations. For example, earlier in chapter, Jesus walks on water to reach the disciples' boat in the night. They are terrified, of course, and Jesus says, "I AM; do not be afraid" (v. 20). The translation is typically, "It is I; be not afraid" as in the NRSV and NIV. But such a translation masks the literal "I am" in the Greek. Like pretty much everything else in John's gospel, all these "I am" statements signify Jesus' divinity. He is not only the Messiah, but God.

³ *Abide* is one of those words that we find in our Bibles, but rarely use ourselves. It translates the Greek word, *meno*, which is variously translated as "remain," "stay," "endure," "abide," and "continue." John uses *meno* to convey the permanence of Christ's relationship with his people and with each of us as individuals. This permanence is a deep, active, and very real union – we are *in* Christ and Christ is *in* us, both being favorite formulations of Paul's.

In this last meal and talk with his disciples, Jesus takes the vineyard imagery around himself. He is the true vine. He is the true Israel, the fruitful vine that Israel had failed to be. He is the Israel that is able to keep its covenant with God to simply love God and love neighbor. He is the Israel through whom all the families of the earth would be blessed, thereby fulfilling the promise God made to Abraham long before (Genesis 12:3).

You'll remember that the other "I am" statements we've looked at so far can be seen as not-so-subtle hints to Jesus' divinity or, at least, his identity with the Father. Based on that, we'd expect to find Jesus as the vinegrower in this passage – for it is God who is the vinegrower in the Old Testament passages. However, Jesus makes himself the vine in the metaphor; the grower is the Father. This "I am" statement identifies Jesus with Israel, the people of God. He is a Jew. He is human. He is one of us. Moreover, Jesus, as the true vine, the true Israel, exists in enduring relationship with both the Father, who is the vinegrower, and with his disciples, who are the vine's branches.

It's helpful to step back from Jesus' words for a moment and picture a grapevine, all twisted and turning upon itself. It is hard to tell vine from branch or branch from branch. It is a whole, a unity, a community of sorts. It takes all three – the vinegrower, the vine, and the branches – to produce abundant fruit. The vinegrower continually prunes and shapes the vine, getting rid of dead branches and shaping the branches so they can bear more fruit. Because grapevines will tend to grow lots of leaves and shoots that dissipate the vine's energy and suppress the production of fruit, the vinegrower is always busy making sure that the vine is producing fruit and not just a pretty show of green leaves.⁴

Jesus' meaning seems clear. When the branches remain part of the vine, the branches can grow and thrive. If the branches are cut off from the vine, the branches wither and die. Likewise, we are to abide in Christ, just as he abides in us. It is only in Christ that we can find the life that we seek. As the vine gives life to the branches, Jesus is the giver of life to us. After all, he is the Bread of Life! So the question is always, will we remain in the vine or will we go our own way? Will we seek the independence and self-sufficiency that the world values and offers? Or will we remain connected to the vine, remain in Christ, entangled with and dependent upon not only Jesus, but the rest of the branches, the entire community of believers?

It is important for us to realize that abiding in Jesus means much more than just believing or even trusting Christ. It is about remaining in union with Christ, in a deep and enduring relationship. This is how we are to *be*. Our very *being* is to be grounded in this oneness with Jesus. In Peterson's paraphrase of John, Jesus says, "Live in me. Make your home in me just as I do in you." First *being*, then *doing*.

Producing fruit

Finally, we the branches are to bear fruit. We are to allow God to prune us and shape us so that we have the strength and vitality to love and to love well.

We can bear fruit, but only by remaining in Christ. It is this deep union with our Lord that enables us to do what God would have us do. Without this deep and enduring relationship, we can do none of what God desires from us.

But we shouldn't think that Jesus' way is some sort of gray, joyless obedience. Instead, Jesus assures us that he has said all this so that our "joy may be complete" (15:10). Joy, according to Merriam-Webster, is "the emotion evoked by well-being, success, or good fortune, or by the prospect of possessing what one desires: DELIGHT." As Don Carson writes, the love of God is the love for which we were created. When we live within that love, rather than try to run from it, we discover a joy deeper and more lasting than any of the temporary joys that the world offers. So the question is simply this: will we remain in the vine?

⁴ John uses a wordplay here that the English translations can't really capture. In the Greek, prune (v. 2) and cleanse (v. 3) are the same Greek root. The point is not vine growth, but fruit production. A big showy vine that produces no fruit is not God's intention. Metaphors can be very thought-provoking!

Abiding Still

In John 15, we find more talk about our abiding in Jesus and Jesus' words abiding in us. This is often difficult to understand. What does it really mean to "abide" in Jesus, to "remain" in him, to "dwell" in him, or to "continue" in him, all of which are valid ways to translate the Greek?

In his study guide on John's Gospel, Mark Matson⁵ helps us to get a little better handle on this by taking us through a few key verses from John 15.

1. "Bear much fruit and become my disciples" (15:8). Playing off the initial metaphor of the vine and the branches, Jesus defines discipleship in terms of its results. To be a disciple is a matter not just of believing in some sterile way but of demonstrating that belief in tangible, productive ways. By linking discipleship to tangible results, Jesus sounds a theme similar to that found in chapter 8, where he directs the believers to abide in his word.
2. "Abide in my love" (15:9). Fundamentally, abiding in Jesus means to remain tied to the very nature of Jesus, who loved the world and loved his disciples. Thus, being a disciple means to remain rooted in the very nature of Jesus' mission to love the world and so bring light into darkness.
3. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love" (15:10). But abiding in Jesus' love is not a matter of belief for emotion; it is ultimately proven by action. So keeping his commandments is the basis for proving that one abides in that love. Earlier, in 14:15, Jesus affirmed the connection between keeping his commandments and loving him. Indeed, Jesus said that following God's commandments is how he demonstrates his own love for God: "I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father" (14:31). In chapter 15 Jesus returns to the connection between keeping commandments and love. The two are inextricably linked -- one cannot truly love God without following God's wishes. In the same way, one cannot truly say he or she abides in Jesus' love without following his wishes, which are the same as God's.
4. "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (15:12). This commandment to love one another was first explicitly introduced in the final scenes of the supper (13:34). It was repeated at 14:21. In this context, Jesus links the commandment to love one another with the desire to remain in his love. In other words, one cannot love Jesus without manifesting the same love toward others. Here is the core of Jesus' self revelation: self-giving love.

As you can see, the key is to grasp the intimacy of relationship that Jesus desires for us and with us. If we keep the metaphor of the vine and its branches in our mind's eye, we'll perhaps begin to sense the astounding and very personal love that God has for us all and the love that God asks of us all.

⁵ from Mark Matson's *Interpretation Bible Study on the Gospel of John*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1998, p. 95-96.