

Another jam packed theological lesson from John's gospel for today. And there is so much to consider in these 8 verses that I had difficulty figuring out where to start, so, as the old axiom tells us, when in doubt, begin at the beginning.

So let's begin with the 'I AM' in the "I am the vine". Where do we hear 'I am' in the bible for the first time? Way back in the book of Exodus, in the time of Moses. The Lord God Almighty has told Moses that he was to lead the Israelite people out of slavery, and that God would be with them in this journey. <sup>13</sup> But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" <sup>14</sup> God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" (Ex 3. 13-15)

God is who God is. Think for a moment of the implications of that. God just is. It's so simple and so huge! God is, always was, always will be.

Now, let's go to the beginning of John's Gospel and see how he introduces Jesus to his readers: 'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. <sup>2</sup> He was in the beginning with God. <sup>3</sup> All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.' (John 1: 1-3)

For John there is no question that 'God is' and Jesus 'is' as well -- and they are one and the same, and it has been so since the beginning of time. John's entire gospel is the narrative of God in Christ and how Jesus embodies God; or Jesus is God in the flesh. And the many 'I am' statements John provides his readers throughout his gospel—about 20 by my count, give different visual images to help people understand who and what Jesus is to them. John's use of 'I am' is not an accidental choice of terms!

The first time Jesus says "I am" is in Chapter 4, the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. She at first reckons Jesus to be a prophet, and while in conversation with him, she tells Jesus she knows that the Messiah is coming. And Jesus' response is "I am". In the English translation Jesus says "I am he". But in the Greek it's simply "I am". A very clear message here! As an aside, what is also of note is that Jesus reveals himself as Messiah first to a woman; and a Samaritan woman at that--before he even tells his own disciples.

Ok, do who recalls some of Jesus' other 'I am' statements?

- The bread of life (6.35)
- The bread that came down from heaven (6.41)
- Living bread (6.51)
- From him (meaning God), he sent me (7.29)
- Light of the world (8.2)
- The son of man (8.38)
- Before Abraham was, I am (8.58)
- In the world ... I am the light of the world (9.5)
- The gate for the sheep (10.7)
- God's son (10.36)
- The resurrection and the life (11.25)
- Teacher and Lord (13.13)
- The way the truth and the life (14.6)
- I am in the Father and the Father is in me (14.10)

- I am in my Father and you are in me and I in you (14.20)

And the last 'I am' statement, today's scripture; I am the vine (15.1). It is an interesting image particularly for farmers and gardeners to visualize, to help in understanding the relationship between God, Jesus and us.

God is the vine grower, which, you know, makes sense for the Creator, the maker of the garden. Jesus is the vine growing in God's garden, and we are the branches. This is an image of relationship and connectedness. The Creator is the grower, the provider, the pruner, the farmer if you will, in whom the vine is planted, from whom the nourishment for the growth of the vine comes. From the vine the branches grow. Jesus tells his followers: "Abide in me as I abide in you". When we **abide** in Jesus and Jesus in us, we're connected to the Creator, the source of life, that's when we are able to produce the most fruit.

'Abide': there's another one of those words that makes you stop and think. It's a word we don't use much anymore. But incredibly important for this scripture passage—and for John's gospel for that matter!

In the entire gospel of John the word 'abide' is used about 45 times.<sup>1</sup> Now, that's a lot of abiding! And in this vine story alone we hear it eight times. Might be a bit important, eh? So it would make sense to understand what the word abide means.

I looked it up in the dictionary, which wasn't at all helpful, so I looked up these verses up in a number of different translations. And here are the words used instead:

-'remain' (*Youngs Literal, NET, NLT*) -remain united (*Good News*)

-stay joined to me (*Common English Version, Easy to Read Bible*)

Those made sense to me because of the growing aspect of the vine, and probably because I'm a gardener, and it's spring and I'm watching spring flowers coming up through the earth, and my flowering vines are coming to life, and in fact was just this week doing some pruning, and I did putting the branches on the burn pile.

I checked a couple of contemporary language versions of the Bible, (*The Message, JB Phillips*) so, not true translations, but modern language rewrites of the original Greek, to see what words they used for 'abide': growing in me, live in me, make your home in me. Those kind of creeped me out a bit. The idea of something 'growing in me' or 'making its home' in me sounded a bit parasitic. Ok, so maybe I'm getting a bit too literal...

Anyway, getting back to the vine, and the interdependence and mutuality of the gardener to the vine and vine to the branches!

To get the fruit, the vine grower needs the vine, and the vine needs the gardener. And from the vine the branches grow to produce flowers, and then the fruit. The branches need the vine from which their life force comes, so they can produce fruit and the vine requires the care of the gardener to keep it healthy. This is true mutuality<sup>2</sup>, an interdependence between God, the gardener, Jesus, the vine and we who are the branches, the fruit bearers. And this led me to somewhat of a mind-blowing thought—yes we need God, and we need Jesus, but *God needs us too!* Let that sink in for a second; not only do we need God, but God needs us too! Because we produce God's fruit. And as any

---

<sup>1</sup> My Notes from a workshop I attended Feb. 17/18 with guest speaker was Karoline Lewis, well know New Testament scholar/professor and renowned Johannine scholar

<sup>2</sup> Karoline M. Lewis: John Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2014 page 197

gardener will tell you, the branches closest to the vine are strongest, because they receive the most nutrients, and so bear the most fruit for the gardener.

Branches growing the wrong way are pruned back, tied back or cut off by the gardener. And I'm thinking it's just as well that the Great Gardener does prunes back or redirects the branches from time to time, because if not, the plants and the garden can get pretty unruly – and not very productive.

But when the branches are not connected to the vine, the life force from the vine cannot possibly get to the branches. “Without connection to a life source, abundant life is not possible.”<sup>3</sup> So ‘abiding’ is staying joined with, allowing the life force to flow through, nurturing, growing, bringing life. “Because” as Jesus said “apart from me you can do nothing.” (v. 5) Life comes through Christ.

The worse thing for a branch is to lose connection from the vine, or grow too far away from the vine. When ice storms and strong winds blow, those branches break off, some are blown away, and yes some do wind up on the burn pile. And I'm sure we've all known some ‘branches’ that have lost their way, even some who have been burned and so are no longer with us in the garden.

So, I've taken this metaphor about as far as I can. By abiding in Jesus, by staying connected to Jesus, by letting Jesus nourish us, by yes, feeding on Him, we remain close to Him, and with the life force of Christ abiding in us, we remain supple and strong enough to withstand the many storms that life inevitably brings. How do we abide in Jesus? By keeping the connection; by coming to church and worshiping together like we do on Sunday's is one way. Reading the bible, studying the bible either on your own using resources from recognized scholars helps to keep us on the right track, group bible studies bring a synergy that individual study just can't, reading or watching other religious materials also works. But most of all—it takes prayer; daily prayer, just you and God to strengthen your relationship with the Divine Source. We know that a healthy relationship requires commitment. Take time each day to sit and let the life force of Christ into your soul.

Stay connected, Abide in Jesus. To abide in Jesus, is to abide in His love, and it is His love that nourishes our souls.  
Amen

---

<sup>3</sup> Lewis p. 198