

John 15:1-8

I AM

May 02, 2021

Opening Prayer: Gracious God, allow us to abide in you even you abide in us.

In considering this text in relation to current events I am drawn to speak of abiding.

- I desire that health care workers can find the strength to abide.
- I am hopeful teachers and students will find a way to abide.
- Grand-parents, business owners, long-term care residents are being required to abide while awaiting much desired visits.
- My parents from the States want to come visit; a few in this community want to see the world; at this moment all would-be travelers need to abide.

Maybe abiding in Jesus will help us abide gracefully in these months. My hope for this morning is to unpack a bit of the “I AM” statements in John’s gospel, particularly the vine & fruit imagery, and reflect how might abide in Jesus and abide well in our communities. We begin with the “I AM” (s).

I have never taken on the “I AM” sayings of Jesus from John’s gospel as a whole. One quandary has been that of perspective—focus on a tree (a vine in this case) or the forest? In addition, the “I AM” statements found in John’s gospel have serious theological overtones which at times minimize questions of discipleship. This week I have set out on a grand adventure of welding the “I AM” declarations of Jesus, or at least one of them, in John’s gospel with a commitment to discipleship.

We begin with the “I AM” statements themselves:

- I AM the bread of life (living bread)—John 6:35, 51
- I AM the light of the world—John 8:12
- I AM the [sheep]gate—John 10:7, 9
- I AM the model shepherd—John 10:11, 14
- I AM the resurrection and life—John 11:11, 14
- I AM the way, the truth, and the life—John 14:6
- I AM the true vine—John 15:1, 5

The formulation of these statements could be traced to several sources of first century Palestine. “I am” statements have been found in the literature of each of the following: cultic spirituality of the Greeks, spirituality which migrated from India, Gnostic spirituality of the late 1st century, and Hebrew spirituality.¹ Jesus and the compiler of John’s Gospel were no doubt cognizant of the ideas and language swirling around them. Each “I AM” statement of Jesus carried with it a certain criticism of the philosophical world in which Jesus walked as well Jewish themes present in Hebrew writings.

¹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Gospel According to John* in the Anchor Bible commentary series (New York: Doubleday & Company, 1966), pp. 533-538.

Susanne did a great job last week with the Good Shepherd motif and wonderfully explored the True Vine image a year ago in relation to references within the Judo-Christian canon. Each of the I AM statements, I believe, all have precedents in the Hebrew scriptures. Since I and most preachers are more familiar with the Hebrew scriptures than, say, the writings of First century mystery cults we tend to link the I AM statements with our Old Testament. And rightly so, but the depth of their implication goes beyond that single source.

Today's text on the True Vine and bearing much fruit surely harkens back to the wedding feast at Cana where there is fruit of the vine aplenty. It also, though, echoes Isaiah 25 in which God prepares a feast for all peoples consisting of "rich food and well aged wines" (Is 25:6). Amidst this abundance of Isaiah 25 God will swallow up death forever, wipe away the tears from all faces, and take away our disgrace. This certainly adds a layer to the True Vine imagery and what it might mean for us to bear Good fruit.

All this is good, but it gets even better when set alongside the cult of Dionysus also called Bacchus. In Greco-Roman religion, Dionysus was "a nature god of fruitfulness and vegetation, especially known as a god of wine and ecstasy...The bacchantes were believed to possess occult powers and the strength...to tear living victims to pieces before indulging in a ritual feast."² This is quite a contrast when set alongside Isaiah 25, John 15, John 2, and the grape and wine master we know as Jesus more broadly. Whose way in the world will we trust? Which gods of the world, or which God, will we follow. One serves up well aged wine, wipes away tears, and tears up the shroud of death; the other's wine gives strength for tearing apart people and creation.

Trust is at the foundation of this religious life we call Christianity. In my lexicon to trust the way of Jesus means walking and talking the way of Jesus. This is challenging because it means we must engage our shadow sides: temperament, the family member on the opposite side of the political aisle, the neighbour across the alley. Earlier this spring I was taken with a story coming out of the Middle East found in the *Christian Science Monitor Weekly*. It connects with the climate summit which has recently taken place.

"When Israeli environmentalist Gidon Bromberg looks out at the shimmering blue of the Mediterranean, he sees more than beauty. Among the complicated mix of images that emerges for him are the thousands of years of culture and exploration that traversed its waves and shoreline, and the damage inflicted by pollution, overdevelopment, and now the climate crises..."

For Mr. Broomberg—Israeli director of EcoPeace Middle East, which promotes peace through environmental collaboration—and for his Palestinian

² Britannica Encyclopedia at <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Dionysus>

and Jordanian colleagues, the need to protect all the bodies of water these neighbours share is a prime motivator. And a guiding truth for them is that nature and the environment care not at all about human-made boundaries...Undergirding EcoPeace Middle East is the understanding that climate change can and should play a role promoting unity in the region...A climate-centered approach, he says, “creates a different conversation, a conversation of a common threat, but also a common opportunity that links not only Israelis and Palestinians but gives further credence to why we need greater regional cooperation with Jordan and also the Gulf states”.³

Jesus abided with Nicodemus in John chapter 3. Jesus abided with the Samaritan woman at Jacob’s well in John 4. Jesus abided with the slow learning disciples while even washing their feet in John 13. When we abide in Jesus we are pointed in the direction of abiding with our neighbours, abiding with our families, and seeing our common threats as an opportunity to foster peace. Goodness, groups of Arab and Jews are doing so. Goodness, the Americans and Chinese are beginning to abide with each other when it comes to reducing green house gas emissions. Maybe drawing strength from Jesus will strengthen us to abide well with those placed in our lives and the collective dangers before us.

Abiding in Jesus also means a willingness to offer critique to the self-centered and harmful philosophies around us. Another periodical I read regularly is the *Christian Century*. A recent editorial explored the role of the Church in a post-pandemic world. Quoting Peter Marty:

[T]here is some outsize work ahead for pastoring in an age of conspiracy and disinformation. We’re seeing “a kind of moral freak show unfolding,” says Peter Wehner, as lies penetrate our national psyche and a common sense of reality fades beneath the blurring of fact with fiction. But at least we know what we’re up against. Churches can be committed to speaking the truth, displaying constancy, addressing paranoia, denouncing cults, and elevating the gospel above every nefarious claim that demonizes others or sows chaos.

I think this is a profound challenge Peter Marty puts before the Church. At some point we simply have to hang our hats on what makes something true for us. In John’s gospel, it is Jesus. He is the true vine, and we are the branches. In this imagery, the manner we interpret and discern truth should come from Jesus.

We do and say what Jesus did and said.

We trust MCC and others committed to relief and reconciliation. They know the terrain because they are there. Having traveled internationally and visited with

³ Dina Kraft, “For Mideastern trio, hope that peace is in the air” in *The Christian Science Monitor Weekly* (April 5, 2021), pp. 16-17.

MCC, MDS, and International workers I am inclined to trust them. There is a difference between people, politics and policy; these groups understand this.

QAnon and other truth disinformation machines need critique because they spread ideology not reflective of Jesus' actions, teachings, death or resurrection. As Susanne noted last week, Jesus sought out the most unsavory as his role of being a Good Shepherd. Jesus took to task the establishment for their lack of concern for the those on the social fringes. Sometimes saying, "I disagree with your point of view, but I do think we still be friend or family."

To follow this way of Jesus is not easy. We benefit from habits of abiding—spiritual disciplines. This could include but is not limited to the following:

A regular reflection on the saints and prophets among us. I am, for example, still processing the Elaine Enns and Ched Meyers session from this last Thursday hosted by MCC SK and Mennonite Church SK. There was much there. When we read about and hear from the Saints and Prophets of our tradition we better equip ourselves to respond well to the opportunities before us.

Conscientious reflection. Many of you know that I am working at Tiefengrund Rosenort Mennonite Church one day a week and one Sunday a month. Well, this congregation scored a CMU summer intern to accompany my .2 time up that way. Earlier this week we talked through a bit of his summer. A friend of the congregation will reflect on his visits. A small team will give feedback to his sermons. We will read books together. We will ponder scripture aloud. Conscientious reflection is the way of growth and the way of abiding so that we might bear much good fruit. It is a path worthy of an intern and us all.

Finally, each of us is unique and will be drawn to our own ways which enable us to abide well. Ways of abiding might entail puzzles, an on-line community, exercise, nature, minimize their technology⁴, and so forth I hope Jesus of the gospels is interwoven in our abiding, whatever form it takes.

Jesus says he is the true vine. Abiding in him will enable us to abide more graciously and faithfully with those circumstances through which we are living and those people placed in our lives. So, abide well. Through the centuries the church has cultivated significant ways of abiding well: some contemplative and others action based. This is a gift to us and the next generations. May we live into treasury we have inherited which may nourish the generation coming. Amen.

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⁴ As an example see Cal Newport's *Digital Minimalism: On Living Better with Less Technology*, 2019.