



**VILLAGE
CHURCH**

Presbyterian (USA)

I Am the True Vine

SCRIPTURE:
John 15:1-11

February 12, 2023 — Sermon by Rev. Dr. Rodger Nishioka

Friends, in this sermon series we have explored the seven “I am” statements of Jesus Christ that appear in the Gospel of John and only in the Gospel of John. Let’s recall them together.

Jesus said, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry. Whoever believes in me will never be thirsty.” Jesus said, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.” Jesus said, “I am the gate for the sheep. I have come that you might have life and have it abundantly.” Jesus said, “I am the good shepherd. I know my sheep and they follow my voice.” Jesus said, “I am the resurrection and the life. All who believe in me, even though they die, will live. And all who live and believe in me will never die.” Jesus said, “I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.” And finally, Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.”

This is chapter 15 and in chapter 18, Jesus is arrested. He knows his time is near. In his last “I am” statement to his disciples—the men and women who left everything they had and have walked with him during his public ministry for three and a half years—he tells them: He is the vine, they are the branches and the most important thing they can do is to abide, remain, stay. Some translations choose the English word, ‘dwell’—dwell in him just as he dwells in them. He knows he is leaving and the last word he gives to them is to remain in him, to dwell in him, to stay in him, to abide in him.

Eleven times he says this. “Abide in me and I abide in you. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you. Abide in my love.” Jesus wants his followers to set a pattern because he knows that unless they do, they will not survive the coming days.

When I was working at the General Assembly Offices of the Presbyterian Church (USA) in Louisville, Kentucky, we called a new director of our peacemaking program. It was interesting and controversial because we called ruling elder Gary Payton, a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel. That’s right. The Presbyterian Church called a retired Air Force lieutenant colonel to be director of the peacemaking program. He and his family moved from Idaho to join us in Louisville. Soon after he joined the staff, Gary and I were having lunch together in the cafeteria and I asked him about his service in the Air Force. He had led a fascinating life. At one point, he asked me, “Rodger, did you ever serve in our nation’s armed forces?” I told him, “No, Gary, I never had that honor.” Then he asked me, “Do you know why we do the same drills over and over again in the military?” I replied, “No, Gary, I don’t. Why do you do the same drills over and over again?” Gary answered, “Because in a time of crisis, we know you will not rise to the occasion. In a time of crisis, you will default to your training. We drill over and over to set a pattern.”

Eleven times Jesus says to the disciples: abide, remain, dwell, stay. The image is a powerful one. Israel has long used the image of the vine to represent itself. Jesus says, “I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me, you can do nothing.” All of our sustenance, all of our power, comes from the vine. We do the good that is ours to do because of the presence of Jesus who abides in us and we abide in him. It is not our own doing.

It was during the time working for the national offices of the Presbyterian Church (USA) that I worshiped at the Crescent Hill Presbyterian Church in Louisville. Our marvelous pastors were a clergy couple, Revs. Mark and Barbara Barnes. One Sunday after worship, Barbara, asked to take me out to lunch.

We had to set a date three weeks ahead because I was traveling so much and had so many other commitments. I apologized for my calendar being so full and she said, “That is fine. I kind of expected that.” The day came for our lunch. We went to a restaurant and sat across from each other. She said she had good news and I asked, “What’s the good news?” Barbara said, “It is great news. Lean in.” So I leaned in across the table from her and she said, “The Messiah has come!” I was a little perplexed and said, “Okay. Thank you. I kind of already knew that.” Then Barbara said, “Oh, Rodger. I have even better news. Lean in!” So, I leaned in toward her across the table and she said, “No! Come on! Lean in!” So I warily leaned in even more and then she said, “You are not him!” And I do not remember what I said in response, but I am sure it was probably something defensive like, “Well, I know that. I don’t think I am the Messiah. I’m just busy doing God’s work.” But if I am honest, there was more than a little in me that was thinking that I was at the heart of the ministry instead of Jesus and if that ministry was going to happen, I had to do it.

That was an important pruning moment for me. Jesus says, “I am the true vine and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit.” My pastor Barbara was right. I was too easily falling into the wrong belief that I was the vine instead of Jesus. My job was to remain, stay, abide in Jesus as Jesus abided in me. It is my pattern—to abide, to remain, to stay, to dwell.

Jesus knew the time was coming when those whom he so loved would be without him. So, it was important that they set a pattern. That they remain, stay, abide in him even when he is no longer with them.

Susan Lord died last August at 90 years old. She lived an active and vibrant life but in her later years, her body began to betray her and she ended up in the hospital a number of times. After one hospitalization, I visited with her in rehab. It was evening and I could tell she was in pain because she would wince every time she moved. I was concerned so I asked her about it. She confirmed that she was in pain from therapy earlier in the day. I asked her about pain medication and she told me they had offered it to her but she

didn’t like it because it made her sleepy and her brain fuzzy. She said she did not want to sleep all day and miss any visitors. She wanted to be able to think and concentrate. I encouraged her to do as her doctors recommended and Susan, strong-willed as ever, told me it was up to her to decide and she was right. I asked how she coped with the pain and she said when it got bad, she would lie there and pray. I asked her what she would pray and she told me she liked how I had shared with her to breathe in God’s mercies and to breathe out God’s mercies to the world. She said that helped. Then she said that when the pain got to its worst, all she would say is one word over and over. She would say quietly just under her breath, “Jesus.” Over and over again. She said after awhile, it seemed to get better. When I say my morning prayers, I think of Susan Lord, saying over and over, “Jesus.”

Susan knew her pattern: “Jesus.” She knew how to abide, to remain, to stay in Jesus even as he stayed with her. That is our calling: To remain, to stay, to abide in Jesus.

So when you are bullied at school and no one reaches out to help you—remain, stay, abide. When you wake up in the middle of the night troubled and anxious—remain, stay, abide. When yet another Black man is killed by those who were sworn to protect and to serve—remain, stay, abide. When your heart is broken and your trust betrayed by one whom you love—remain, stay, abide. When the depression deepens and the addiction threatens to claim your life—remain, stay, abide. When the one you promised to love in sickness and in health no longer recognizes you—remain, stay, abide. When you are haunted by the image of the grieving father holding the hand of his dead 15-year-old daughter in the rubble of their apartment building in Turkey—remain, stay, abide. Jesus says, “As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.”

The bread of life. The light of the world. The gate. The good shepherd. The resurrection and the life. The way, the truth and the life. The true vine. Remain, stay, abide. “Jesus.”

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.