



Centennial Bible Study:

Deepening Faith

Session 2

Stay Connected

John 15.1-11

Gathering

Opening Prayer:

Lord Jesus, you are the true vine. Help us always to stay connected to you and each other, that we may bear God's fruits to a world hungry for your presence. In your name, and with the Spirit's guiding, Amen.

- Imagine a time you felt a strong sense of “belonging.” Describe the feeling in a few words.
- Offer an experience you have had with gardening, planting, or tending to something.
- Is there a difference between “belonging” and “fitting in”?

Encounter the Word

Have a volunteer read the following verses, while others follow along. You may choose to read the text in several translations, noticing differences in translation.

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine grower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 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. Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete. (NRSV John 15.1-11)

In John's gospel, Jesus' speech at the Last Supper has three major parts: the first farewell

speech (13.31-14.31), a second farewell speech (15.1-16.33), and a long prayer (17.1-26)¹. The reading in this study comes from the second farewell speech. Jesus begins with an “I am” saying, introducing an image to describe his relationship to God and to his disciples, a vine and branches. As in another instance, when Jesus compares himself to a gate and a shepherd (10.1-18), he first offers the analogy, then clarifies the image. As in any metaphor, some aspects of the image apply and others do not. In this passage Jesus engages our imagination but does not leave us guessing about how this image applies to him and his followers.

Engage and Reflect on the Word

- Imagine a meal with your best friends before leaving them for a long time. What would you like to tell them? What lasting impressions would you like to give them?

This is where we find Jesus and his disciples in this reading from John’s gospel. Jesus is celebrating the Last Supper with his closest friends, having already washed their feet, and warned them that one among them will betray him. Soon the meal will be over, and he will see the bitter fruits of his betrayal: arrest, trial, and execution on the cross. We, the readers, know that this gathering is Jesus’ last chance to instruct his disciples concerning what his ministry is all about before their relationship is forever changed. How are they to continue as a community without his physical presence which they have enjoyed up to now? While the setting may be cause for sorrow, the message is hopeful, future-looking, and empowering. “Do not let your hearts be troubled!” is how Jesus begins his famous last speech to the apostles.

Jesus introduces the image of vines and branches. His phrase beginning with “I am...” is the last of the “I am” statements in John’s Gospel, sayings which assert Jesus’ unique, divine authority. Vines and vineyards are common images in the Bible. They often describe Israel, the people of God, or the Messiah.² Jesus offers a familiar image, then expands it, explaining that he is the true (Greek: *alethine*: reliable, trustworthy) vine, and that just as branches on a vine bear fruit, so too the disciples produce ‘fruits’ because of their connection to Jesus. And Jesus is committed to this direct line of contact between himself and the believer. The word he uses to describe his commitment is “abide” (Greek: *menein*: stay, dwell). Jesus abides in us as we abide in him. This organic quality of unity with Christ and occasional “pruning” by the vinedresser (God) is what defines the life of the believer and the life together of the community of disciples. Gardener, vine, and branches are all necessary to produce fruit. The result of this life of interrelatedness is nothing other than pure joy.

For discussion:

- Does this image of vines and branches speak to you? The vineyard is a common biblical image; what images might we use today to describe the same connection with God?
- Have you ever had the feeling of connectedness which Jesus describes? If so, how has it deepened your faith?
- In Greek the words for “prune” and “clean” are related. Have you ever felt “pruned” or “cleansed” by God’s Word in your life? What effect did it have?

- Have you ever felt “cut off” from God? Describe your experience.
- Martin Luther once remarked that the peculiar thing about the branches is that they are not aware of their fruitfulness, nor do they count the grapes. What do you think he meant by that? What does it mean to be “fruitful”?
- The promise in baptism is that by water and the word you are connected to God to have a fruitful life. What areas of your life seem fruitful right now? What fruits do you receive from others?

Closing

Consider the following statement:

The emergent science of ecology is easily summed up: Everything’s connected. But inter-connection is anathema to a consumer notion of the world, where each of us is useful precisely to the degree that we consider ourselves to be the center of everything. We believe that pleasure comes from being big, outsized, immortal. . . But the testimony of the rest of creation is that there’s something to be said for fitting in. — Bill McKibben, *Utne Reader*.

- What light does our reading from John shed on this quote? What are some ways you can practice “staying connected” this week?

Closing prayer:

God help us
 To rise up from our struggle.
 Like a tree rises up from the soil.
 Our roots reaching down to our trouble,
 Our rich, dark dirt of existence.
 Finding nourishment deeply
 And holding us firmly.
 Always connected.
 Growing upwards and into the sun².
 In Christ,
 Amen³

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¹ Especially Isaiah 5.1-7, Jeremiah 2.21, and Ezekiel 15.1-8; also Jesus’ “Vineyard Parables”, eg. Mark 12.1-12.

² I have borrowed the terms from Charles H. Talbert, *Reading John: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Fourth Gospel and Johannine Epistles*, New York: Crossroad, 1994, pp. 211-215.

³ Prayer by Michael Leunig