**REMAIN IN ME**

John 15:1-25

Key Verse 15:4a

We’ve been studying a portion of the Bible called, “The Upper Room”—a room where Jesus and his disciples spent their last moments together. In this room, Jesus had just told his disciples that he would be leaving them; to a place they couldn’t follow. He told them that he would soon die. And what’s more, one from their own group had just left the room to go and betray Jesus. All of this must’ve been a lot for the disciples to hear.

At the end of chapter 14, it says that they all left the Upper Room (14:31) to then walk to the Mount of Olives (18:1). On their way there, Jesus wanted to continue to comfort his disciples, especially after everything they heard. So, as he often did, he drew from the everyday examples around him. He must’ve seen a vine growing in someone’s garden as they were walking along together, and gave them this final allegory.

Today’s passage is one of the most relevant passages for us today, because without having Jesus physically here with us, having a relationship with him seems so vague, like a mystical thing. But Jesus shows us that even though we don’t have him physically here with us, he offers us a very real kind of relationship with him that gives life and joy like nothing else can. So let’s examine Jesus’ teaching and learn from him what it means to remain in him and produce fruit.

**The Gardener**

Think of a garden, with flowers and vines and grass and bushes and trees, vegetables and herbs and fruits. Think of all the work and attention and care that go into taking care of a garden. The sole goal of any good gardener is to keep all of his plants healthy, alive, and bearing fruit.

Jesus in this passage presents us with a garden, more specifically, a vineyard. Looking at verse 1, Jesus says his Father God is the gardener. The word for gardener in this passage is better translated as vinedresser (1b). Now we hear this description of God as a vinedresser in the Old Testament, in the book of Isaiah, where God is described as planting and taking care of his vineyard, the people of Israel, and he really wanted them to be healthy, alive and to bear fruit (Is5:1-7). That’s God’s sole concern in this passage too as the gardener of his vineyard—he wants all his branches to be fruitful.

That seems a bit harsh, right? It seems God has a very utilitarian relationship with his people the branches: branches are only good if they’re fruit bearing. Why can’t God just let things grow naturally, like in nature? But if you think about it, what if a gardener just let everything grow and let dead branches fall everywhere and let branches without fruit grow and take over? The entire vineyard would soon choke and die and there would be nothing. Since God is so concerned with the fruit of his vineyard, that means he’s actually a really good gardener. He’s always watching, always looking for ways for fruit to be born. He wants his vineyard to flourish and grow and produce fruit.

**The Vine**

Look at verse 1a. “I am the vine.” Jesus describes himself as the vine in the allegory. He says later in verse 5a that he’s the “true” vine. So, in God’s vineyard, there is only one vine, and that vine is Jesus.

What do vines do? They’re providers of life; they’re the transporters of nutrients from soil to the rest of the plant, they enable growth, they’re the main source of structure for an organism. Think about vines growing against the side of this building. A single vine can cover an entire several story building. It’s the main highway of life for any plant, and especially so with vines. So what Jesus is saying here is that he is the main source of life.

This theme, of Jesus as the source of life, we’ve heard throughout John’s Gospel already. John the author, first introduces this in his prologue, saying of Jesus, “In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind” (Jn1:4). In chapter four, Jesus tells a woman at a well that he is “living water” or “life water” that quenches every thirst and that never runs out, that becomes a spring in us welling up to life eternal. (Jn4). Jesus says after feeding a multitude with bread and fish, he says, “I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never go hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty” (Jn6:35).

Have you ever been really hungry? Then, after being hungry, going to eat your favorite food, and eating so much that you can’t seem to eat anymore, and then still eat some ? After that, there’s such a warmth and satisfaction of being full. Several times. Jesus presents himself as the source of a true and filling life. And here, Jesus brings this theme of being the bearer of life in the very concrete image of being a vine.

Is it really possible to be so full of life? If we’re real, it seems more like we make-do with being kind-of-alive some of the time. In his poem “The Hallow Men,” T. S. Eliot describes human beings as being like scarecrows. Empty inside. We appear to be alive, we look human, but really we’re hollow, we’re filled with straw, we’re empty shells. We try to fill ourselves with friends or success or achievement, or pleasure or fun or whatever, yet it never really fills us. A former president of Harvard was asked what he thought the one problem in his students was after years of overseeing the best university in the world. He said “Emptiness.” All the learning and promise of future and success can’t fill that void we all have

If Jesus is the vine, the source of true life, how can we have this full life? How can we be connected to him?

**The Branches**

We’ll think about this question in a moment, but let’s first look back at what Jesus says in the passage about branches. Look at verse 5b. Jesus says, “[Y]ou are the branches.” If you haven’t picked it up yet, Jesus says clearly we represent the branches in his allegory. And he describes three different kinds of branches: some that are connected physically to the vine but that are dying or dead (2a), branches that are bearing fruit but need to be pruned (2b), and finally, branches that have fallen off and are dead on the ground that the gardener uses for firewood (6b).

Just thinking about branches in nature, the purpose of a branch is to be connected to the vine—that’s what they’re for, and that’s where they originate; the vine. If they’re not, they start to brown, shrivel up, leaves curl and fall off, they dry up and eventually all off the vine. No matter how much a branch wants to be it’s own vine, it can’t. Disconnected from the vine, a branch becomes just a stick. Jesus points this out in the passage, in verse 4b, he says, “No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.” He says again in 5b and 6a, “apart from me you can do nothing. If you do no remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers.”

The idea of being dependent on something or someone else isn’t really a popular thing. Some of you are in college, and these years you’ve been able to finally get away from your parents. Or some of you may have starting living out on your own or have just started working in a full-time job. You’re independent; you don’t need the guidance or money of somebody else. It’s good in a lot of ways to be independent. But to look at our lives spiritually as independent individuals, in light of this passage, is to be spiritually dead. Because Jesus is saying that independent from him, we have no life. This is what sin is. The word “sin” literarily means “severed” or “cut off.” So we’re all like severed branches. We’d like to think we’re our own plants, but we’re really just “sticks in the mud” masquerading as plants. If you’ve ever seen the Charlie Brown Christmas special, Charlie Brown is asked to get a Christmas tree. Everyone expects a nice looking tree, but he brings back this really pathetic little branch with a single red ornament on it, weighing it down. That’s us: we decorate ourselves, we play pretend that we’re plants, but we’re really sticks.

So if Jesus is the true vine, and we’re disconnected branches, the question again is, how do we get connected to Jesus the vine? The damage seems to have been done. We’re separated, it’s over, and we’ve lost our life source. As the passage said, we’re only good for firewood. The question this passage asks is, “How do we get connected to the vine, Jesus?”

There’s this story that Jesus tells once of a father and son being reunited. The son initially severs his relationship with his dad. He takes his inheritance and goes and spends it on doing whatever he wants to do. But when the money and the fun runs out, the son begins to realize how alone and miserable he is. The son then makes a decision; to go back to his father’s house to beg him to work for him as a servant. But while the son was walking down to be begged to be joined again to his father, his father had been looking and waiting for his son. When the son was just recognizable from far away, the father runs out to his son, wraps his arms around him and kisses him. The son tries to apologize and pleas with his father. But the father ignores him, puts a ring and robe on him and prepares to throw a big party for his son. While the son was separated from him, the father was waiting and longing to be joined again with his son. The father says, “Let’s have a feast and celebrate. For this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found” (Lk15:23b,24).

To be united again with God, all we have to do is turn back to him. He’s waiting for us to come back. He so wants to be with us again. Through the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Gospel, God provides a way for us to be re-connected again with him. Even though we’re dead sticks apart from him, God provides this miracle of re-grafting us, reattaching us to the vine; Jesus. And what was once dead can become alive again.

Are you dried up? Do you feel like no matter what you do, it seems sort of meaningless? Do you feel disconnected from others, that no matter how hard you try to love, it doesn’t seem good enough? Do you find your relationship with God is dry?

Jesus is saying, “You can’t have life on your own. I’m your source of true life. I’m your connection back to God.” Being connected to Jesus begins with a change of identity: am I my own plant, or am a branch of Jesus the vine?

**“Remain in me.”**

Look at verse 4a. Let’s read this verse together. “Remain in me, as I also remain in you.” In the first ten verses of this passage, Jesus repeats the word “remain” eleven times; twelve times throughout. The word Greek word for remain is *men’-o* and it means to abide or dwell in, or to “stay put.”

But this seems strange because Jesus had just told his disciples that he would be leaving them, and where he was going they couldn’t come. And now, he tells his disciples eleven times, “Stay with me.” What does Jesus mean when he says to remain in him when he’s going to leave and why the emphasis?

A lot of people have trouble conceptualizing what a “relationship with Jesus” means. We hear that a lot, but it’s so intangible, because Jesus isn’t here physically with us. We can’t *actually* talk to him or *really* be around him. But Jesus says that to be his disciples they could still be close to him, maybe even closer than they could physically.

Let’s look at verse 4a again. “Remain in me, as I also remain in you.” This sounds a lot like marriage vows. And in these vows, Jesus shows us that he’s very committed to us and he asks us to share in this commitment with him. It’s like we’re at the alter with Jesus, and he’s already said his vows and said, “I do,” and is waiting for our response.

Commitment. Now, there’s a scary word. Commitment to a major, to a job or career, commitment to one person, in a friendship, in a marriage—that’s pretty scary. You’re locked in, trapped, there’s no getting out when things get bad, there’s no trying different things. It’s interesting that Jesus says he’s committed to us, but he has to ask us to be committed to him. What does this tell us? It’s insinuating that we’re notoriously non-committal people when it comes to God. So in a relationship with Jesus, we can’t just put it on cruise control. We can’t say, “Well, I reconnected to God once.” That doesn’t work. A marriage is not just the honeymoon, it’s being faithful to each other for the rest of your lives. Jesus asks us to stay with him, to be committed to him.

How can we remain in Jesus? Look at verse 7. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. “ To get to know anyone in a relationship, we have to listen to them. Jesus shares with us who he is in his words, he gives us the best advice, and his words are life-giving, even life-changing. It’s pretty simple, you can get to know Jesus by just opening up the Bible and listening to what he has to say. He asks for us to get familiar with the way he talks, get to know his voice, and find out who he is, even how he thinks, what’s on his heart and mind. And make a regular thing out of it, like you would get to know a new person—like a weekly date.

I don’t think any relationship has ever worked where two people just coexisted without communicating with each other. Misunderstandings happen, resentment, then loneliness sets in, and the relationship will eventually run dry. You have to talk to each other. So to be in this vine and branch relationship with Jesus is to commit to spending time communicating with him. And he helps us to remain faithful to him through his words. These words make this relationship accessible. And after listening to Jesus’ words, Jesus also says in this passage that we can talk to him, “If you remain in my words, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you” (7). We can come to God with, “whatever” we wish. We can be open and transparent and share even the deepest longings of our hearts, and we know he’s listening very attentively. It says in 1 John, “This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us.” Jesus hears us. He wants us to come and tell him everything. Sometimes we feel like we can’t talk to anyone. We’ve got fears, and we don’t understand. We feel guilty about things, and can’t tell anyone about. Jesus wants to listen to us. He wants us to bring every need, concern and problem to him, and he wants to help us.

This is how we depend on Jesus, like a branch depends on a vine. We not only let his words inspire us and deeply minister to us, but we can also honestly share everything with him. Our relationship is two ways and it becomes increasingly more and more real. Following Jesus, being a Christian, is not distant or superficial, its not a bland theology, it’s about being connected to Jesus. And when we do, life becomes full.

Let’s look at verse 9. “As my father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.” Jesus here gets to the core of what it means to remain in him: it’s to remain in his love. The more we spend time with Jesus and getting to know him, the more we realize how much he loves us. It’s to remember his love. Never forgetting that, “Man, Jesus loved me so much.” We see how much that’s true in this passage. You know, looking at ourselves as dead sticks pretending to be plants, we’re pretty pathetic. A lot of times we try to avoid thinking about ourselves, because of how much we hate ourselves. But we put a smile on go through the motions, but inwardly, there’s an ache. But God didn’t look at us and see something worthless. He sees each of us as someone so precious. You know that feeling you get, when that person you like walks into the room, and you get butterflies tickling your stomach, and all you want to do is to be with that person? I think God gets butterflies when he sees us. God actually likes being around us. He wants so much to love and cherish and spend time with us that he did everything he could to have us, was willing to die to be with us. It says that we’re his “masterpieces” (Eph2:10), that we’re priceless pieces of art to him that no amount of money can buy. And even though we severed ourselves in our sins, we were basically adulterous and selfish and gave ourselves to other loves, God would still have us. To stay with Jesus, we have to know his love and always remember it. It has to become the foundation of who we are; our identity: I’m worth nothing by myself, but I’m worth everything to God.

**Bearing Fruit**

Now, as we’ve mentioned, as branches, we are meant to bear fruit. And Jesus describes the fruit of remaining in him in the rest of this passage. We can think of the fruits of remaining in Jesus in two simple ways: love and joy. If you look at verses 9-17, Jesus repeats the word love 9 times. This is really the fruit that God made us to bear—his love. Jesus says it so well, “My command is this, love one another as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one’s life for one’s friends.” The love of Jesus is what re-grafts us to the vine, and it’s how we remain in him. When we know Jesus’ love, we remain in it, Jesus then commands us not to just sit in his love, but to bear the fruit of his love in our lives. He repeats this command in verse 17: “This is my command: Love each other.”

What does this mean, to love one another? Jesus says in verse 16 that the fruit of love that he wants us to bear is love that “lasts.” The Greek word for lasts is a variation of the word Jesus has been using throughout this passage: “remain.” What I think Jesus is saying is that he wants us to love people so that he can work through our loving others to bring people to also remain in him. This is something Jesus only can do, and it can happen when we begin to love as he loved us; a kind of love that is willing to even lay down our lives for our friends.

And when we do this, we bear the second fruit of remaining in Jesus: joy. Jesus says in verse 11, “I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” True joy and life is when we live this out, when we remain in Jesus’ love and we love others. Then we have this complete joy within us. We shouldn’t be grumpy or complaining or generally unsatisfied. When we’re in love with him and loving others, Jesus says we’re complete. The full life in him happens and we are filled with joy. People will see us, some will even hate us (18-25). But through how we love and our joy, the world will know we follow Jesus, and the world will see Jesus, because this love and joy is who he is.

So there are two questions we can ask ourselves after thinking about this passage:

“How can I remain in Jesus’ love?”

“How can I bear the fruit of Jesus’ love for others in my life?”

When we do, may we experience the vibrant and full life of being connected with Jesus and bearing the fruit of his love.