

Discipleship in the Lectionary – 04/28/2024



A look at the week's lectionary through the lens of discipleship and disciple-making.

Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary Year B

Sunday, April 28th

John 15:1-8

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Abiding in the True Vine?

Like last week's imagery of the shepherd, the Gospel lectionary for the Fifth Sunday of Easter continues with further Old Testament imagery of Israel – the vine. There are six references to “*bearing fruit*” in these eight verses. The fruitfulness of a branch is associated with abiding in the vine (*menō* – continue, stay [remain], endure [persist]) with “*abide*” appearing seven times. At a time when local churches can resemble private country clubs at one end of the spectrum and political action organizations at the other, it is perhaps not surprising there is a distinct lack of fruitfulness of many church denominations across the West. The remedy – abide in the True Vine.

John 15:1-8 Commentary

As context, this passage is part of Jesus' farewell discourse with His disciples (chapters 14-17) which thus gives a degree of urgency to the content. This text is also part of a larger unit with the second half appearing in next week's lectionary (15:9-17).

¹ *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.*

This is the last of the seven main “I am” (*ego eimi*) statements of Jesus that reveal Jesus' true identity. The “I am” is a reference to the “I AM” of Exodus 3:14 - God's “name” revealed to Moses. When Jesus applies “*ego eimi*” to Himself, he is declaring that He is God. If Jesus refers to Himself as the True Vine, there must be false vines. In the Old Testament, Israel is depicted as a vine (Psalms 80:8–19; Isaiah 5:1–8; Jeremiah 2:21; 6:8–9; Ezekiel 17:6–8; 19:10–14; Hosea 10:1–2). In Isaiah 5:1-8, Israel is compared to a vineyard planted by the Lord who expected to yield good fruit. The vineyard produced only bad fruit and thus had to be destroyed [Isaiah 5:7]:

For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting; and he looked for justice, but behold, bloodshed; for righteousness, but behold, an outcry!

In v.1 Jesus refers to Himself as the True Vine – the True Israel and God the Father is the gardener. God is thus in control of Jesus' ministry which includes the branches of the Vine (Christ's disciples).

² *Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.*

The action of God as the vinedresser in this imagery would be clear to the original audience. Fruit-bearing branches are pruned in the spring to allow them to bear more fruit. The dead branches that do not bear fruit are completely removed in the fall.

³ *Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.*

There is a play on words here. The Greek word for prune (*kathairō*) is like the Greek word for clean (*katharos*). Jesus' disciples have already been pruned.

⁴ *Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me.* ⁵ *I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.* ⁶ *If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

The full consequences of the vine imagery are emphasized. A branch apart from the vine cannot bear fruit. Indeed, it will wither and die. The branch must live in the vine and the vine is also living in the branch. Christ continues to live in His disciples through the Holy Spirit. Christians in name only who do not abide in Christ (and thus in whom Christ does not abide) cannot produce good fruit. Such are like the dead branches the gardener removes. The gardener will pick up this dead wood and burn it in the fire.

⁷ *If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.* ⁸ *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*

There is a temptation to read v.7 as though Christ is a magic genie who is at our beck and call to fulfill our worldly desires. There is a clear caveat – “*if you abide in me, and my words abide in you...*” “Abide” in this context can be understood as “*remain.*” Thus, we must remain in fellowship with Christ through the Holy Spirit by practicing the various spiritual disciplines and remaining in the Word – studying Scripture and following Christ's commands. Our desires now become aligned to Christ's desires. By such the Kingdom grows bringing glory to God and the bearing of such fruit is the true proof of discipleship. Being in Christ is the source of purpose and authentic community.

Reflections

During this current time of social upheaval, there are many false vines appealing to the consumerism and materialism of the “I-centered” world and there is certainly no shortage of hired hands and false shepherds willing to exploit people's fallen desires, spiritual hunger, and need for belonging and acceptance. It is frightening to see how abiding in Christ can be distorted to a set of legalistic rules that exclude people or, at the other extreme, the acceptance of extreme license. Our history also demonstrates how quick we are to attempt to build the Kingdom by our own hands. No matter how well intended we may be, without abiding in the True Vine our best efforts produce unintended consequences and often blow up in our faces. As an example, the optimism of the Social gospel era of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries led to many in the church to support the eugenics movement which produced such disastrous fruit – something that today's emphasis on “reproductive justice” is at risk of duplicating. Mere social reform, as our history informs us, results in other problems – some worse than the original problem. There is only one True Vine. Be careful of where you abide.

Bearing fruit is thus more about *being* than doing. Yes, fruit requires our action, but this action arises out of grace – the fact that we are grafted into the vine in the first place by the Father through His Son. When we remain in the True Vine, we are at our most productive. It is in this way that we glorify God. Being regularly pruned is part of the process of remaining in the vine and bearing fruit. This applies to us individually in our walk as disciples and as a church community. The short-term discomfort of pruning is worth it in the long run. Today is a time where the harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few. However, it only takes a few workers who are abiding in the True Vine to bear much fruit.

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