

Sermon – April 28, 2024  
“Abide in me as I abide in you”  
The Rev. John C. Wright



Text: John 15:1-8

*Pray with me: Father, let the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer. Come, Holy Spirit, come, visit, fill, and anoint the sharing of these words. Make them a blessing for your people that leads to life eternal and fruitful labor as we tarry here on this mission field. Lord, come and astonish us with your word this day. Amen*

Christ is risen! He is risen indeed! You are beginning to sound like people who are being filled with the joy of Easter through the love of a risen Lord. May that joy, the power of a resurrected life, grow in each of us day by day, and may our joy overflow into people around us who are desperate for such contagious joy. Christ is risen! He is risen indeed!

I am not an expert viniculture person. I have raised grapes and have often failed to do a good job with the care of the vines. I did have the good fortune to spend time with a friend who was an expert vine dresser. He would often explain to me the necessary care needed for the growing of good grapes, usually when he saw the condition of my vines. I don't recall all that he tried to teach me, but there were two key things that stuck with me: grapes only grow on new growth and grapes need sunshine to ripen. Bud break for grapevines in Virginia has historically been March 21st. You typically have until that date to prune the vines. Grapevines are pretty

easy to prune. You have the main stem that comes up from the roots and is split into two vines that run short distances on the lower of three wires, about two feet each direction. Everything else gets pruned off as grapes only grow on new growth. Old growth does not produce grapes but carries nutrients from the soil to branches. The second lesson I remember is that once the vines begin to produce grapes, you have to remove the leaves to allow the sun to shine on the grapes. The grapes need light to keep away the moisture and mold and to allow them to ripen. Now you know pretty much everything I know about being a vine grower. But in the first century in Israel, almost every landowner would have had a vineyard and known more than I will ever learn about growing grapes.

Jesus compares himself to a grapevine, stating, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower”<sup>i</sup> The familiar image of grapes growing gives those listening insight into Jesus’ nature. The goal for a Jew in the first century was to be in the Promised Land, to stay in the Promised Land without Rome’s influence over the land. Every Jew wanted to be a vine growing in the soil of the Promised Land. A vine growing in the Promised Land was an image for Israel found in the Old Testament. Jesus’ statement that he is the true vine and his Father is the vine grower would be shocking news to a Jew. Jesus’ claim that he is the true vine would be heard as his claiming the Promised Land is not the place for faithful Jews to be connected to God but that Jesus alone is the true vine, and it is in him that they are to be connected to God. We might miss this shift from the Promised Land to Jesus as the connection to God, but first-century Jews would not have missed it. Jesus is telling them they are to be branches connected to him so that they might bear fruit. Jesus tells us his Father is the vine grower who removes branches that bear no fruit and that all fruit-bearing branches get pruned so that they bear more fruit. The Father, who is our Father through Jesus’ death on the cross and resurrection, is the one who works among the branches to remove all dead branches and to prune all others so that they might produce more fruit.

Jesus’ claim that he is the true vine and God is the vine grower applies to us today as well. We become branches abiding in Christ when we come to faith in him. The Father will remove those branches that do not produce fruit and prune branches that do bear fruit so that they may produce more fruit. As I read this text this week, I became convinced I did not want to be a dead branch as I did not want to get removed from the true vine and tossed into the fire. To keep that from happening, I realized I needed to be one who is bearing fruit. I began to wonder what

Jesus might mean by fruit in this context. I was pretty sure that it was not grapes. Our response to the image of Jesus as the true vine is not to go and buy land to plant a vineyard and grow grapes, fruit for Jesus, and that gave me hope as I know I am a terrible grape grower. But I wanted to know what Jesus meant by bearing fruit so that I might have a focus on being one who bears fruit. Notice that in the image of a vineyard Jesus shares, fruit is not defined. That implies that we are to understand what fruit is when Jesus speaks about it. I was not certain what was meant, so I began to look at the use of fruit in the Bible. Now I will share with you that there are 369 occurrences of the word “fruit” in the Bible. For those taking notes, you might want to get some extra paper to get all of these uses of fruit in the Bible down. Fortunately, as one begins to look at the use of fruit in the Old Testament, some patterns occur that let us quickly reduce the biblical meaning of fruit to a few ideas. One of the first uses that we find of fruit is what is produced by trees and plants and is given to humanity for food. We should recall the command given to Adam that he is not to eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the center of the garden but the fruit off all other trees is given to him for food. There is another use of the word that we need to pay attention to and that comes from the command in Genesis for humanity to be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth. I don’t see that usage as a redundant expression of the same idea but as two separate aspects of what humanity is to do: they are to be fruitful and to multiply. The multiply part I think is easy to understand as it leads to filling the earth with people, but we will need to figure out what God means by charging us to be fruitful. We see this idea show up again after the Fall when God makes a covenant with Abraham, telling Abraham that God will make him exceedingly fruitful and will make nations of him. We have gone from God’s command to be fruitful to God making Abraham’s descendants exceedingly fruitful. Again, I don’t understand the making of nations and exceeding fruitfulness as redundant but as two separate actions with the making of nations as multiplying Abraham’s descendants to become nations, but it is not clear to me what God expects from the descendants of Abraham as fruitful people. Another Old Testament usage of the word “fruit” connects to sacrifice. The people of God are to bring of the first fruits of their labor to God. The idea with this usage relates to the giving of tithes and offerings from the physical blessings that God brings forth through our labor in creation. We are to bring our gifts to God, but I don’t think this is the idea of fruitfulness. My Old Testament list is not exhaustive, but I think we can see the idea that the people of God are to be fruitful people. Again, what it means for us to be fruitful is not immediately clear.

Let's move into the New Testament and see what we might learn there. One of the first ideas we find is a reference to Mary and the fruit of her womb, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior. Jesus makes many references to other ideas for fruit as he teaches. He tells us that trees not bearing good fruit are cut down and thrown into the fire. He also tells us that good soil, when sown with the word of God, brings forth fruit and yields in one instance a hundred-fold, in another sixty, and in another thirty. We see the idea of the people of God producing abundant fruit in this parable. Jesus also tells the crowds listening to his teaching that the "kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people that produces the fruits of the kingdom."<sup>ii</sup> We should begin to wonder what the idea of fruits of the kingdom is and what the abundant fruit we are to yield might be. Paul in his letter to the Galatians provides some very helpful ideas when he lists for us the fruit of the Spirit, writing, "By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."<sup>iii</sup> From all of these scripture uses of the word "fruit," I think we are beginning to get the idea that fruit has a lot to do with love, the love of God and the love of other people. Let me share that love in the context of John's Gospel, and hence the fruit we are to produce in Christ is serving others and bringing the lost into a relationship with Christ. We are to complete Jesus' mission by abiding in him and letting that abiding relationship fill us with love so that we might give that love away to others, and in doing so, we see them become part of the kingdom of God.

That might seem like a big jump from tracing the idea of fruit in the Bible to love as the fruit Jesus speaks to in our passage this morning. So let me move us back to branches abiding in Jesus to give us additional insight. Many translators will use the English word "remaining" to describe our relationship found in this text with Jesus. I have difficulty deciding which of the two I like, as both the words "abiding" and "remaining" speak to aspects of being connected to the life-giving, life-sustaining, true vine that is Jesus. Let's look a little more at the idea of abiding. What we are trying to describe with the image of a vine and its branches is a relationship where God's love flows to Jesus, and, through Jesus and Holy Spirit, that love flows into us as those who are abiding in Jesus. We can do works of service for others in our own personal power and not from an abundance of the love of God, but those works will not have the saving impact that service done in and through God's love will have on people who are not abiding in the one true vine, Jesus Christ. We are loved with God's love before we enter into an abiding relationship with Jesus. We know this because Jesus tells us in John's Gospel that God so loved the world

that he gave his only begotten Son that whoever believes in him will have eternal life. We also know from Paul's letters that God loves us while we are lost in our sin, as while we were still sinners Christ died for us. We are loved before we are saved; we are loved by God while we are still sinners. Our performance, our behavior, does not influence God's steadfast love for us. Jesus' mission is not to judge people but to bring them salvation. Jesus gave us salvation at the cross and now we are to be those who continue Jesus' mission until it is completed by sharing the love Jesus has for us and gives to us as we abide in him with others who have not yet experienced Jesus' love. That is fruitfulness. Key in this discussion of abiding is the need for us to be those who have experienced Jesus' love before we can share his love with others. We have to experience a filling of Jesus' love before we can with love care for others. We have to be filled with Jesus's love through our abiding or remaining in him so that we might share his love with others and continue his mission towards completion.

The idea we should be pulling from the text is that we want to be those who through our experience of Jesus' love, our abiding in him, are bearing fruit, are loving God, or Jesus, and others. We should have a desire to love others, those who are part of the kingdom of God through belief in Jesus and are abiding in the true vine with us, and those who are attached to the false vine of the world who have not yet heard the gospel in a manner they can respond to it. We are to love God and love our neighbor. That is fruit, and the world is to be filled with people who are fruitful (read that as loving as God loves us and multiplying by sharing that love with those who don't have it). The world is to be filled with God's people, the descendants of Abraham who are exceedingly fruitful, who are exceedingly sharing Jesus' love. Such people are sharing the fruits of the kingdom of God.

We might begin to ask ourselves and the text, "What is the love of God?" The love of God is cruciform love, love that will go to the cross, suffer, and die for us that we might be able to be in relationship with God once again. It is love that will die that we might live. The love of God is a transforming love, a love that meets us where we are and moves us towards God so that we might become branches abiding in Jesus and bearing fruit. God's love gives us the passion He has for us and allows us to have that same passion, in turn, to love others as we have been loved. God's love has moved Him across the ages to seek the lost with great passion, and when we abide in Jesus, the true vine, we receive this same love and passion for other believers as well as for the lost, We receive the desire to move into God's mission, to join Jesus in his mission to

all people, to become those who are filled with the love of God through our abiding in Jesus, who have a passion for those who are lost in the world. If we dare to examine our hearts honestly, we may discover that we lack such passion. We may find that we struggle to love others as Jesus loves us, to lay down our lives for others. When we find such a lack of love within us, we should realize that we have a love deficit. We are those who need an infusion of God's love. We need to open our hearts to receive the amazing love of God through a relationship with Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit.

As we look into our hearts and find that we lack a passion for sharing God's love with others, we must realize that we need to stop our labors for Jesus and allow God to reconnect us to the infinite love available to us as branches abiding in Jesus, the true vine. We begin by looking at our hearts and confessing anything we find there that might be keeping us from the love of God. We may have sin we are struggling with and cannot seem to move beyond, constantly turning from our sin in earnest repentance, yet then falling back into that same sin. We need the love of Jesus to move us to holiness. Love drives out sin in us and in the world. When we find ourselves in a love deficit, after we confess our sin, we move in our prayers to asking Jesus for more of his love and for us to love him more completely. As the Father loves the Son and the Son loves the Father, we also are to seek to enter into the love the Son has for us, love that died on the cross for us, and, in response to Jesus' love, return love to him by loving others. We also need to begin to think of ourselves as those who belong to Jesus. We should remind ourselves daily, as soon as we awaken each day, that Jesus loves us and that we are Jesus' brothers and sisters. We are all beloved sons and daughters of the Father through Jesus in the power of Holy Spirit. Pray, asking Jesus to fill us with his love.

Let me remind us again of the fruit of the Spirit list. In that list the first fruit listed, the highest priority fruit, is love. Paul in 1 Corinthians 13 will write of love, "It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." <sup>iv</sup> Paul tells us that the key is love, God's love that flows into us through abiding in Jesus the true vine. God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that all who believe in him will have eternal life. Love came before the cross. Love is the cross and through Christ, we are able to love God and our neighbor because of the steadfast love we find at the foot of the cross.

*Pray with me: Father, would you help us to abide in Jesus that we might be filled with your love and in turn find new passion for your mission to love you and others more completely? We pray in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen*

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us, because he has anointed us to bring good news to the poor. He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Abide in the love found in the one true vine and go forth in the power of that love into Jesus' mission to all the world.

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<sup>i</sup> Matthew 15:1 NRSV Kindle addition. P3010.

<sup>ii</sup> Matthew 21:43 NRSV Kindle addition. P3010.

<sup>iii</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3444). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.

<sup>iv</sup> Bibles, Harper . NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha (p. 3400). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.