

Abiding in the Vine: A Sermon

John 15:1-8

The great Anglican biblical scholar Sir Edwin Hoskyns wrote of Jesus' Last Supper Discourse in his Commentary on John's gospel: "The whole scene is an epitome of the Christian religion."⁽¹⁾ If that is true of chapters 14-17 as a whole, then I think it could also be argued that the eight verses at the beginning of John chapter 15 are such an epitome in miniature, for in just these few short verses, John includes all of the major themes of his version of the Christian gospel, all tightly woven together.

What are those themes? What is the passage about?

The first theme has to do with the John's understanding of the church. The passage is about ecclesiology. Jesus' statement "I am the true vine and my Father is the vinedresser" echoes numerous Old Testament passages. These passages all contain a message of judgment. In each of these passages, Israel is the vine, and God is the vineyard owner or planter. So in Isaiah 5, the prophet speaks of a vineyard owner who plants a vineyard that yields wild grapes – a vineyard that will be trampled down and made a waste. "For," says Isaiah, "the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel."

John echoes these passages, but with a Christological twist. For John, Jesus is now the true Israel. He is the true vine, and his Father is the vineyard dresser. Where the previous vineyard had been declared a waste, Jesus – the True Vine – produces fruit. There is still a message of judgment, however. The church is not the vine, but the branches that dwell in the vine. The vineyard dresser prune the vine, and the branches that do not yield fruit are cast into the fire. If the church, or at least members of the church, fail in their mission to dwell in the vine, they will suffer the same judgment as

Israel. So the passage is about John's understanding of church – and we'll get back to that in a few minutes.

Second, and even more important, the passage is both Christological and Trinitarian at the same time. Jesus' statement – "I am the True Vine" – is the last of the great "I Am" statements in John's gospel, the way that John indicates Jesus' identity by echoing the Old Testament identification of the God of Israel to Moses as the great "I am who I am." (Exodus 3:14) So the passage is about Christology. For John, Jesus is the very Word of God made flesh. (John 1:14)

C. F. D. Moule, in his classic study of *The Origin of Christology* focuses on the unusual character of what he calls the New Testament's language of the "corporate Christ."⁽²⁾ It is common for Paul, for example, to speak of Christians as being "in Christ." If you think about it, this is a very strange way to speak of a fellow human being. No matter how much we might respect someone like Abraham Lincoln or Martin Luther King, we would not speak of people who admired them or had been influenced by them as being "in Abraham Lincoln" or "in Martin Luther King." But for early Christians, Jesus was a human being who had lived in recent history who was nonetheless understood as having a more than individual identity. Followers of Jesus not only admired him after his death, but somehow also became part of him. They were "in him."

In John's gospel, these relations are reciprocal.⁽³⁾ Christians are "in Christ," but Christ is also in Christians. Christ is in the Father, and the Father is in Christ. The normal way that John talks about this is with the word "indwelling" or "abiding" or "remaining." By the way, this language of indwelling is the source for the Prayer of Humble Access in the Book of Common Prayer: "that we may evermore dwell in him, and he in us." So there is first a reciprocal indwelling between the Father and the Son. In chapter 14:10, Jesus asks his disciples: "Do you not believe that I am in the Father and

the Father is in me?" There is also a reciprocal indwelling between Jesus and his disciples. We see this in this morning's reading: "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." (15:5). There is not only an indwelling of Father and the Son, and the disciples and the Son, but also of the disciples in the Father and the Son. In 17:21, Jesus prays that his disciples may all be one, "just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us . . ." and that "they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one." Jesus promises that after he ascends to his Father, he will send the Paraclete, who will also indwell them. The Spirit of truth, Jesus says, "dwells with you and will be in you." (14:17).

That is a lot of indwelling. If you have ever seen a grapevine, with its branches and leaves all inter-tangled, Jesus' metaphor of the Vine and its branches seems just right.

The orthodox doctrine of the church is quite appropriate here. Speaking of the Trinity, the Fathers use the language of *perichoresis* or *circumcessio*. The Trinitarian persons indwell one another, and dwell in us as we dwell in them. The Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit indwelling one another just is the orthodox doctrine of the Trinity. The perichoretic Trinitarian relations are tied up with the divine missions. In John, the Father sends the Son to dwell among us. (1:14) That is the incarnation. At the heart of the incarnation is the hypostatic union. The Son dwells in the Father because as a divine person, he is of one nature with God. The Son dwells with us because as the Son who is sent, who tabernacles among us, he completely shares our human nature.

In John's gospel, the Son is glorified on the cross (17:1), and we receive eternal life because we look to him in faith. "As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life." (3:14-15) In the resurrection and ascension,

the Son returns to the Father, and sends the Spirit, who dwells in us (16:7, 14: 16, 17). The orthodox doctrine is that it is through the indwelling Spirit that our fallen humanity is sanctified by being united to the risen and glorified humanity of the ascended Christ, who is now with the Father.

Some might be tempted to suspect that this is a rather Catholic understanding of redemption. In Protestant theology, our redemption is always, and only about an alien righteousness. All of this talk about union with the risen Christ sounds suspicious. Yet our own heritage says otherwise. Philip Melancthon, in his Apology for the Augsburg Confession, quotes Cyril of Alexandria on John 15 that we are not only joined to Christ spiritually, but since Christ is the vine, and we are the branches, Christ is in us also "by the communication of Christ's flesh."⁽⁴⁾ It is the risen and ascended Jesus Christ who indwells us in his bodily humanity. Similarly, the great Reformed theologian Thomas F. Torrance points out that all the documents of the Scottish Confession place their emphasis of the union of God and humanity in Christ, and that justification follows from this union.⁽⁵⁾

But this means that John 15 is not only about Christology and the Trinity, but about us. The passage is about grace. Grace in John's gospel is indeed about forgiveness of sin and pardon. John 3 tells us that "God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already." (3:17-18). In ch. 5:24, Jesus says that whoever believes in him "does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life." Throughout the gospel Jesus turns upside down normal conceptions of who is righteous and unrighteous. He gives the water of life to the Samaritan woman at the well.(ch. 4) He gives sight to the man born blind (ch. 9), and points out to his opponents that because they think they see, they are truly blind. (9:41) After Simon Peter denies Jesus, the risen Christ

pardons him, and tells him to "Feed my sheep!" (21: 20-23)

But grace is not only about forgiveness and pardon. The Jesus of John's gospel does not forgive us our sins only to leave us in our sins. Grace is indeed effective. It changes lives. If the seeing remain blind, the blind come to see. As Jesus says in this morning's passage, union with Christ produces fruit. Note, however, that the passage is not a demand, but a promise. Jesus does not demand that we produce fruit or face dire consequences. The branch does not grit its teeth, pull up its boot straps, and produce fruit through sheer effort. If the branch tried that approach, it would be entirely ineffective because the branch depends completely on the vine. Jesus says: "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." (15:4) A few verses later, he says, "Without me you can do nothing." (v. 5) It is all grace. Jesus does not say, "If you produce fruit, you will dwell in me," but "If you dwell in me, you will produce fruit." So the responsibility of the branch is not to go out and start producing fruit. The responsibility of the branch is to dwell in the Vine, and the Vine will take care of the fruit.

Of course, there is a warning connected to the promise. The branch that does not bear fruit is cast away. But the branch's failure was not that it failed in its job of producing fruit. Rather, it failed to produce fruit because it did not abide in the Vine. "If anyone does not abide in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers." (15:6) But, how could it be otherwise? A branch that separates itself from the Vine certainly will not produce fruit. And on its own, it will wither and die.

When it comes to the theology of grace, there are, I think, two messages we need to hear, and John's gospel has both. The Medievals said that there were two perennial temptations to which the pilgrim is subject. The first temptation is that of

despair. There are times when we became so overwhelmed with our own sinfulness that we despair of God's forgiveness. No matter how hard we try, or what we do, we are convinced that we have done such wrong that we cannot earn God's favor, and we are certainly damned. The proper message to such a person is to offer the promise of grace and forgiveness. We indeed cannot earn God's favor, and we do not have to. No matter how far we have fallen, we cannot sin beyond God's mercy. God always forgives. The opposite temptation, however, is that of presumption. No matter what wrong we commit, no matter how far we have strayed, we remain complacent because we are convinced that we have nothing to fear from God. God has to forgive. After all, that is his job. The proper answer to the presumptuous is the message of judgment. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God! (Heb. 10:31) Sometimes we need to preach law, and sometimes we need to preach grace. Sometimes we are the blind who need to see. Sometimes we think we see, and we need to come to recognize that we are blind. The difficult thing, especially with ourselves, is to apply the right remedy on the right occasion to the right person. It is disastrous to preach judgment to the despairing, or mercy to the complacent.

Jesus' message to moral failures in John's gospel is not condemnation, but forgiveness. To the woman at the well, Jesus offers living water. But to those who are complacent, there is indeed a message of judgment. If we think we see, our blindness remains. And even Christians are not beyond receiving that warning. If we separate ourselves from the Vine, we will wither.

What is the fruit that Jesus expects of those who dwell in the vine? There have been different answers. Some commentators suggest that the fruit is more disciples. Others suggest that the fruit is moral behavior. A third answer, and the correct one I think, looks to the verses that immediately follow, and are not included in this morning's lectionary reading. In

verse 9, Jesus says: "As the Father has loved me, so have I 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." (15:9-10) In verse 12, Jesus says: "This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." In the context of the verses immediately following, it seems to make most sense that the fruit that Jesus looks for are the acts of love that result from dwelling in God's love. To bear fruit is to love God, and to love one another as Christ has loved us. To fail to bear fruit is to refuse the love that has been given us – to be ungrateful for the divine love, and to refuse to love one another as we have been loved.

This understanding links up once again with the perichoretic understanding of the Trinitarian relations that is a central theme in John's gospel. The Trinitarian persons exist as indwelling relations of knowing and loving. The Father indwells the Son, and the Son the Father, and the Spirit the Father and the Son. The missions of the Trinitarian persons are expressions of that love in creation, redemption, and sanctification. Our own salvation consists in our being incorporated into that love as the Son dwells in us and we in him, through the Spirit who dwells in us and unites us to the risen Christ. As we dwell in the love of the Trinitarian persons, we are no more servants but friends of God. (15:15) We are indeed called to be partners in the divine mission – friends of Christ – and to love one another as Christ has loved us.

And if that is the case, it rather solves a difficult problem. In the "Apology for the Augsburg Confession," Philip Melancthon suggests that we cannot love God if we do not first see God as a lovable object. The human heart cannot love a God whom it perceives as angry and threatening or giving commands of the law. God can only be loved if we first see that God is merciful, that God loves us, and is for us. Only

then can we experience the gratitude that enables us to respond to God's love with love of our own⁽⁶⁾. If Jesus' command to bear fruit is understood as a demand that threatens punishment, resentment is perhaps predictable. If, however, Jesus' command is not a demand, but an offer, the offer to share in the perichoretic love between Father and Son, to indwell the one who indwells the Father, who shows his love for us in calling us friends, and who gives himself on the cross for those he calls friends – as Jesus says, "Greater love has no one than this, that someone lays down his life for his friends"(15:13) – then Jesus' demand is not that we bear fruit in order to avoid punishment, but rather is an offer to fall in love with the One who loved us first. As Jesus says, "When I am lifted up, I will draw all people to myself." (12:32) When we realize that we are not condemned for our sins, but rather that Christ bore them in his own body, we respond in gratitude, and we are invited to become partners in the mutual indwelling love that is shared between the Father and the Son.

I said at the beginning that John 15 started with ecclesiology, with John's understanding of the Church. And it seems we have come full circle. In John's theology, the Church is not primarily an institution. Rather, the Church is defined in terms of its relational being. The Church is composed of those who are one with Christ, and with the Father, and with the Spirit. Those who indwell Christ and are indwelt by his Spirit are loved by him, and love him in return. And they love one another as well. The eternal life that the branches share with the Vine is the very life of the persons of the Trinity. The branches are those who dwell in the Vine, and dwell in his love. That is not the demand, but the invitation, that is extended to us by the One who has loved us from eternity. How can we refuse?

1. Sir Edwyn Hoskyns, *The Fourth Gospel* (London: Faber & Faber, 1940) 2nd edition, revised, 1947. ed. Francis Noel

Davey, 471.

2. C. F. D. Moule, *The Origin of Christology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 47-96.

3. Moule, 64.

4. Philip Melanchthon, "Apology of the Augsburg Confession," art. 10.56, *Concordia: The Lutheran Confessions* (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2005, 2006), 2nd. edition, ed. Paul Timothy McCain, 154.

5. T. F. Torrance, "Justification: Its Radical Nature and Place in Reformed Doctrine and Life," *Theology in Reconstruction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 150-153.

6. Melanchthon, "Apology," art. 5(3). 7[128]-8[129], p. 103.