

“Better together”

Prick up your ears and put on your thinking caps. Today’s sermon is at least in part interactive.

As you have probably heard me say before, John is the outlier among the four canonical gospels. Mark, Matthew and Luke are called synoptic meaning “same sight.” That is they seem to tell the story of Jesus’ ministry and resurrection in a similar if not exactly the same way. There are many differences about John’s Gospel. For example, can anyone tell me Jesus’ favorite method of teaching in Mark, Matthew and Luke? Yes, parables, but in John there is at most one parable (personally I think calling it a parable is a stretch). In the synoptic gospels most of Jesus’ teaching and preaching is in short interactions, but in John Jesus speaks in long discourses.

Another notable difference is the “I am” statements. In the Gospel of John Jesus makes seven “I am” declarations. Can you name any of them?

1. “I am the bread of life.” (John 6:35, 41, 48, 51)
2. “I am the light of the world.” (John 8:12)
3. “I am the door of the sheep.” (John 10:7,9)
4. “I am the resurrection and the life.” (John 11:25)
5. “I am the good shepherd.” (John 10:11, 14)
6. “I am the way, the truth, and the life.” (John 14:6)
7. “I am the true vine.” (John 15:1, 5)

These powerful statements were considered revelatory by his followers. By his opponents they were considered to border on blasphemy. What was blasphemous was the use of the phrase “I am.” It might seem strange that a rather common phrase would cause such accusations. It goes back to the Hebrew Scriptures and the scene when Moses encounters the burning bush. In that interaction God reveals to Moses the Divine name. In the Greek translation it reads *εγώ ειμι ο ων* (transliterated *ego eimi ho on*). Translated into English the Divine name is “I am that I am” or “I am who I am.” The Divine name was considered so sacred that one was not allowed to say it. When Jesus begins one of these statements by saying *εγώ ειμι* “I am...” his listeners hear echoes of the Divine name and Jesus making himself equal with God. It seems to us a small thing but to them it was blasphemy; an offense punishable by death.

Truly these seven “I am” statements are powerful. Each one of them tells us a different aspect of Jesus in metaphor. Some of these metaphors are easier to sort out than others. What do you suppose Jesus is trying to tell us when he says that he is the vine and we are the branches? We think of connection, community and health from being connected to the source of life. Why is it important to be connected in general? Certainly for health of mind and spirit. Why is it important to be connected to Jesus in particular? To be connected to the Holy One of God.

Thus we have that it is good to be connected in general and in particular it is good to be connected to Jesus. But there is something more about this being connected that Jesus points out. Look at the passage again. What word stands out especially in the latter part of the passage? [Listen for abide]. Abide is not a word we use very often. What does it mean to you? The dictionary tells us that the verb abide can mean a number of things such as to tolerate, to endure, and to await. But those do not seem to be what Jesus is getting at. Another choice is to sojourn that is to stay in a place. This seems a little closer but I don't think that Jesus is meaning that we stay in a particular place so much as we stay fixed in him.

We are to abide in Jesus just as he abides in us. That is we are to stay within him as he is within us. I think that is why he chose this metaphor of a vine. The level of connection with Jesus is cellular. We don't just abide as we abide in our home or in Middleburg. We are so connected with Jesus that we cannot go anywhere without him and he cannot go anywhere without us. When we abide in Jesus we are one with him.

Whenever I ask children where Jesus lives I get one of two answers. One is that Jesus lives up in heaven. The other more frequent answer is that Jesus lives in our hearts; all of our hearts. When Jesus lived on earth he lived among us. Now that he is resurrected he lives within each of us. It can be wonderful and intimidating.

It is wonderful that we have Jesus within as our companion and one who gives us strength. For some it can be a little worrisome because we might disappoint or defame Jesus by some of the things that we do. Jesus understands the temptations to sin, and he abides within us to help us through. Jesus knows and is not judgmental. He reminds us of God's desires for us, and comforts us when we fail.

Jesus wants us healthy and whole not plucked off the vine and thrown into the fire bin. If pruning is required to remove a bit that is not so helpful God will do it as any good gardener would. But God—Father, Son and Holy Spirit—wants healthy vines and branches for they are what bear good fruit. The fruit is the will of God being done on earth as it is in heaven.

Through baptism God has grafted us onto the holy vine of Jesus. Drink up the nourishment that comes through the vine. Take heart that the true vine which is Jesus holds on tightly to each of us. Flourish as part of the community that is called the children of God. Abide in him as he abides in you. That is what he longs for and craves that we may all flourish and be at one with him.