

## Our Invitation to 'Be With' Christ

Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2021

### Sermon, "Our Invitation to 'Be With' Christ"

Several weeks ago our youngest son Justin proposed to his girlfriend Cortney. They're planning to get married in the fall of 2022; that's a year and a half away. But it won't be long before they'll be caught up in one of the most difficult decisions facing an engaged couple: Who should we invite to the wedding?

You remember what it was like: there are some people that are automatic invites: family members, close friends. But there were certain people that you knew you should invite, but you really didn't want them to have any part of your special day. So you invite them, and hope they send their regrets.

Invitation is a powerful thing. An invitation tells you that you're in with the "In Crowd."

Invitations are powerful, and the invitations of Jesus are even more powerful.

- Matthew 11:28, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest."
- Mark 6:31, "Come with me by yourselves to a quiet place and get some rest."
- Matthew 25:34, "Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world."
- Mark 10:21, "Come, follow me."
- John 1:39, "Come and see!"
- John 7:37, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink."
- John 21:12, "Come and dine."

Each of those invitations hinges on the word, "Come." And that's a critical word. But in John 15, there's an even more powerful image than "come." In John 15, Jesus invites us to *stay*. *Abide in me. Remain in me. Don't simply come and go.*

The Revised Common Lectionary assigns John 15 to the church on the Fifth Sunday of Easter. That makes it a bit out of place because this dialogue between Jesus and his disciples comes on the eve of Christ's crucifixion.

In the previous two chapters—chapters 13 and 14—Jesus is with his disciples in the Upper Room. The other gospel writers tell us that is where Jesus initiated the sacrament of Holy Communion. At the end of that meal, Luke tells us they sang a hymn and left. John simply provides us with the benediction: "Come," Jesus invites. "Let us be going." And they leave the Upper Room for the Garden of Gethsemane.

Even though Jesus dismisses the disciples after two chapters filled with teaching, that doesn't mean the teaching ends. He continues teaching for the next two chapters as they make their way to Gethsemane. Finally, in chapter 17, we read the words of the prayer he uttered in that garden.

As they walk along, they no doubt passed the Temple. There one of the decorative features were the colonnades which were adorned with golden vines with clusters of grapes as large as a man. Those decorations became the basis for a visual parable. I can envision Jesus pointing to one of those clusters and declaring, "I am the True Vine and my Father is the Vinegrower."

It's hard for us to comprehend just how shocking this declaration was. It's a shocking statement because at least six other times in John's Gospel, Jesus utters one of his "I Am" statements. Each one called to the minds of his Jewish followers the greatest declaration of deity in the Old Testament. When Moses asked God his name, God simply responded, "I Am that I Am." That expression of God's own deity was so hallowed that Jews refused to utter it.

Now, Jesus not only utters it; he applies it to himself. "I Am the True Vine" and we, his followers, are the branches. This is not simply an invitation to approach him or to temporarily be with him; it is an invitation to live in him. Paul says that we are grafted into the Vine.

But that's another reason why this is such a shocking passage from Christ. In the previous two chapters Jesus made it clear that he was leaving. And not only was he leaving, he told his disciples "Where I'm going, you can't come" (John 13:33).

Now the disciples had to be wondering, *How am I supposed to abide in someone who's gone? How am I supposed to live in you if you leave me?*

That's really a dilemma that we face today: *How am I supposed to live in someone I cannot see?*

The answer to both dilemmas seems to be found in verse 7: "If you live in me and my words live in you..." It seems as though the way Christ lives in us is through his Word. That's why it's so important for us to continually read and hear and study the scriptures. The word of God becomes a part of our lives. The Word of God begins to live in me.

And I'm not talking just about the Bible. In John's gospel, Jesus is described as the Word: "In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God...And the Word became flesh and lived among us and we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father's Only Son, full of grace and truth" (John 1:1 & 14).

When we speak of God's Word living in us, we're not just talking about the words written on the pages of a sacred book. We're also talking about Jesus Christ himself living in us.

How many of you have seen the 1990 movie *Ghost*? It stars Whoopi Goldberg as a con artist posing as a medium who communicates with the dead. It also stars Patrick Swayze as a murder victim who becomes the ghost, and Demi Moore as Swayze's girlfriend.

As it turns out, Whoopi's character is indeed able to communicate with the ghost played by Swayze and at one point she invites him to possess her body so that he might be able to better communicate with the character played by Demi Moore.

I realize the movie is yet another fabrication of Hollywood, but it does illustrate the fact that one physical human being cannot live inside of another physical human being. I cannot live in you anymore than you can live in me because we are both limited by our physical bodies. At best, I can live *with* you or *beside* you, but I cannot live *in* you.

Likewise, Jesus could not live in his disciples—or his disciples in him—as long as Jesus was a physical human being. But one of the beautiful results of the resurrection is that now Jesus through the Holy Spirit has become spirit and as such is now able to live in us.

Another aspect of this story which I find so fascinating is the fact that apparently Jesus said this as he and his disciples were *walking*. Isn't it interesting to consider the Jesus describes himself as the True Vine while he was walking?

The last time I checked, vines don't walk. They stay rooted in one spot. But Jesus was on the go; he had a mission and at that very moment he was on the way to Gethsemane in order to begin the fulfillment of that mission.

So what was Jesus saying when he said that we as his followers must abide in him? What was Jesus saying when he described himself as the True and Living Vine giving life to those branches which stay connected to him?

Simply this: Jesus was telling us that living in him was never meant to be a static experience. We are not called to be stationary Christians. We are called to be on the move with our True Vine.

You've heard people say that we should "go with the flow." To be true to John 15, however, we as Christians—we as his branches—should "go with the Vine."

Jesus goes on to say that if we "go with the Vine," there ought to be some results in our lives. In a vine, those results are described as "fruit." Therefore, if we're going to go with the Vine—or grow in the Vine—then we're going to become fruitful.

If we're not careful, this is where we may get caught up in Western values of productivity. But "We cannot push the fruit out of our branches; we can only abide in Christ and let the fruit develop naturally and organically in our lives. Furthermore, when we abide in Christ, we abide in love, thus loving people into the kingdom of God. Those people, then, become the "fruit" of our loving concern. That is no more intended to objectify converts as fruit than John 4:35 was intended to objectify Samaritan converts as the "harvest."

“Moreover, the scriptures speak of a variety of ways in which a missional person might be fruitful. In Galatians 5:22, fruitfulness is found in one’s attitude and character; in Hebrews 13:15, fruitfulness is found in our speech; and in Matthew 25:14-30, fruitfulness may be found in making wise investments.”<sup>1</sup>

That means your fruitfulness in Christ may look different from my fruitfulness. There is diversity of spiritual fruit just as there is diversity of fruit in the grocery store. And that should give us peace of mind. In our Western culture, we think that we are “responsible for whatever growth might occur in any given situation. However, it would appear that God simply calls us to ‘be with’ God.

“Speaking through the prophet Hosea, God declares in Hosea 14:8, ‘Your fruitfulness comes from me.’ In other words, our fruitfulness is not a by-product of anxious labor; rather, it is a by-product of “being with” Christ.”<sup>2</sup>

That’s why Jesus declares,

“Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”<sup>3</sup>

Ultimately, bearing fruit is not a matter of Western productivity; rather, it is the inevitable result of living in Jesus Christ. Our task is simply to dwell with Christ, with one another, and with neighbor. The results of our dwelling with Christ—the fruit of our abiding in him—is left up to him.

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<sup>1</sup> These two paragraphs are quoted directly from my dissertation, pg. 35f.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, pg. 109.

<sup>3</sup> John 15:4-5.