

Introductory

This material is exclusive to John. It is not included in the TLH one-year lectionary. In LW, it is appointed to be read on the Fifth Sunday of Easter in the B Series. His words can be seen as an encouragement and assurance that by the working of the Spirit His followers are connected to Him and staying connected to Him is the means of enduring until the end.

The connectedness is expressed several times by use of the preposition “ἐν,” generally translated “in,” followed by nouns in the dative case. When that prepositional phrase occurs in the Greek language, it means location beside and within a limited space. Jesus is beside us, and we are beside Him, and the proximity of us to Him is very close.

Most of the translations render “ἐν” as “in,” but I think “with” is better, like in the hymn “Abide with Me.” If you think of a plant or a tree and the connection and relationship of the branches to the main part of the plant or tree, you get the visual picture that Jesus gives us of what it means to be “ἐν,” and that visual is better than one thousand words.

It is important to note here that Jesus is speaking specifically to the Apostles, not to the masses. Regenerated Christians, they are therefore now able to make spiritual decisions, like whether or not they will “remain” connected to Jesus. Neither the dead person nor the unborn is able to decide to come to life, but once alive either can choose to end it.

So, with the Apostle – or with any Christian – who was dead but is now alive, who has received the new birth, these hearers are often weak in faith and sometimes continue to be confused about doctrinal matters, but they are Christians just the same. Review again FC II, where it speaks to the matter of Free Will, noting the state of free will at various times.

Last week, Jesus used the shepherd metaphor, and this week He uses the grape plant metaphor. As was the case with that metaphor, in this pericope also He actually has several points of comparison; several metaphors, the literary definition of allegory, but we were taught in seminary not to do allegory in preaching, and let’s just leave it at that.

One time, I listened to a sermon preached by an LCMS pastor on the Internet. The sermon was on the parable of the workers in the field. The thoughts and words flowed from him like fresh water from a fountain. It was an exceptional sermon. Wanting more, I then listened to another sermon, and it was just okay. That pastor lived in northern California.

There, the hiring of field workers is part and parcel to the agricultural economy, and he was very much familiar with the subject matter. The next week he was not, and it showed. If

I lived in northern California or France, I would ride the grape plant metaphors to the end. But we can only live in one place at one time, and that's what the Internet is for.

Here in the Midwest, farmers and their wives and children operate large machinery and even they very seldom actually touch the product, and we don't even eat sheep and don't appreciate their wool. The rest of America, including the Midwest, is slowly making their way into vineyards, but still most people around here are not that familiar with viticulture.

We spent a week in a castle in Tuscany a few year ago and walked and drove among the vines, and I probably know more than most people about those things. In preaching, we can explain the grape growing process, or we can pick another, more familiar metaphor or extended metaphor on a subject more familiar to the hearers, perhaps also to the speaker.

When people come out of church saying things like "you talk like we talk" and "you use language that we can understand" and "you make it seem so real," then you have chosen your metaphor and other figures well. You have chosen well, and you have chosen to communicate in the way that Jesus communicates, and Jesus knows how to communicate.

In preaching this text on Sunday, I will probably talk about the stalk, the ear, and the kernels of corn or the stalk, the pod, and the beans. If Jesus were preaching in Iowa today, He almost certainly would use those metaphors and not the grapes. If you happen not to be in Iowa, you can talk about the trunk, the branches, and the apple, or the peach, or the acorn.

Having said that, it is still necessary for the exegete to do his homework, to become educated on the subject of viticulture, to understand about grape plants, branches, and grapes, so as to thoroughly understand the meaning of what Jesus is saying to those people in that time and place. We call that the historico- grammatical method of Bible Study.

The first metaphor Jesus uses is that of the "vine - ἄμπελος." The word is used to refer to what comes up out of the ground, like a tree trunk. The second metaphor Jesus uses is "vinedresser - γεωργός," the person who actually takes care of the vineyard, like Francis Duflot in that movie *A Good Year*. In this case, the vinedresser also owns the vineyard

The good vinedresser will espalier the vine onto espaliers. He also uses the "branch - κλήμα" metaphor, defined as "offshoots of the vine" (WP), appendages to the vine that produce the clusters of "fruit - καρπὸν," grapes, and most Americans are familiar. The pericope speaks also to the topic of good works, and the Christians are interested.

Use this text to put them on track about good works. FC IV, not WIK, would be a good place to begin your study of Good Works. Go ahead and pass along some of the things that we confess in FC IV, and maybe even quote it. I quote FC IV all the time, often from the pulpit. But whatever you do, don't make them think that their good works merit heaven.

You can read about applications of the metaphor on the Internet; the wood from branches is soft, good for nothing. Left to themselves, vines grow fast and wild. Pruning is a necessity for growth. There are many branches off the main vine. The main point is connection and staying connected. Your people know about staying connected, don't they?

Textual Notes

1. Last week, when Jesus spoke of the good shepherd, He spoke of other shepherds who were not good, particularly hirelings. They are bad shepherds. This week, He says “Εγώ εἰμι ἡ ἄμπελος ἡ ἀληθινή – I am the true vine,” and if He is the true vine, then that must mean that there are bad vines, or at least vines that were not good. Like Israel, for example.

Once again, we hear Jesus uttering that short phrase that the religious leaders find to be so annoying, “εγώ εἰμι – I am.” The good vine, Who is Jesus, produces good branches, and those branches produce good fruit. Another kind of bad vine is the vine or plant that produces no branches, and with no branches there is no fruit, and the whole plant is useless.

All week people are surrounded by relativity, and they may even be looked down on for thinking in terms of true and false. In his book *The Closing of the American Mind*, Bloom talks about college students incredulously asking him if he's an “Absolutist,” as if the word means “dog turd.” We get a lot of that, and just try using the “s” word in public.

That word is “sin,” which is an absolute. If you believe that on Mt. Sinai God gave the Ten Commandments to Moses, then they are from God, and that's pretty absolute. The Culture is increasingly getting away from that understanding, and relativism is on the increase, and you can talk about sin in church, and we need to take it to the public square.

John really likes the adjective “ἀληθινός,” which means true or genuine, but it can also mean “correct” as opposed to “incorrect,” which sounds lot like “true,” but with a bit of a different nuance. In particular, Jesus the Vine stands in contrast to OT Israel, who are often called “vine,” but not in a good way. Planted by God, they are now fit only for destruction.

I just ordered *Jesus As They Saw Him* (William Barclay) on Amazon, paperback very good for six dollars and change. Since probably seminary, there has been in my file for this Sunday a photocopy – like we called it back then – of chapter nineteen “The Vine.” If you want to know about Israel as the OT vine and it didn't work out, he does a very good job.

The primary meaning of Jesus calling Himself the “true” vine is to place Himself in apposition to OT Israel – it didn't work out, but Jesus does work out very nicely. As for the application these days, there is the correct version of the Christian religion, and there are all the rest which are in varying ways incorrect, some more incorrect than others.

What a breath of fresh air to come to church and hear God speaking openly and unabashedly in just those terms out of the mouth of the Pastor or teacher. Like with grape plants, either the plant or the religion is “correct,” or it is “incorrect,” and with both the plant and the religion, there is only one way to be correct but lots of ways to be incorrect.

If you’re going to have a vineyard, then you need a vinedresser, or a vintner, and the Father is the one who tends to the vines. He cultivates, prunes, and trains them to get the most production out of the vines. So, the vine is good, and the vinedresser is good, and if there is a problem, then the problem is not with either of those two. The branch is the wild card.

2. Jesus now focuses in on that branch, and this is pruning 101. If a branch is not bearing fruit – and you can tell by looking – then you cut it off. If a branch is bearing fruit – and you can tell by looking – then you cut off shoots that are small, or that point down, or that are cutting off sunlight from other branches, or competing with another branch, cut it off.

Cutting off the dead branch is easy to understand but cutting off living branches seems counter-intuitive. The reason why the vinedresser does that is given as “ἵνα καρπὸν πλείονα φέρῃ – that it should bear more fruit.” If you have fruit trees, then you know that the bottom line is how many pounds of apples, peaches, chestnuts and the like you harvest.

When He talks about the branches that bear fruit, He’s talking about the Apostles (16), and the Christian is the fruit, and good works come from that Christian. The branch produces fruit because it’s a living branch attached to the vine. The Christian acts and talks like a Christian because he is attached to Jesus, and the attachment comes through the Apostles.

Jesus is still the vine, the Christian is still the fruit, but the Apostles are all dead now. But before they died, they wrote it down, and from the beginning, “the teachings of the Apostles,” as found in the Bible, have been at the heart of the Church. The Church can be seen as not so much a replacement for, but the natural progression of those teachings.

And in a general way, the observer should be able to detect something different from other people about Christians. That different thing is good works. Christians talk and act like Christians. As our society slouches ever deeper into the abyss of Gomorrah, Christians are increasingly becoming more noticeable. Sometimes we stick out like sore thumbs.

3. Continuing to speak descriptively, He says of the group, the Apostles, “ἡδὴ ὑμεῖς καθαροί ἐστε διὰ τὸν λόγον ὃν λελάληκα ὑμῖν – you (pl) are already clean through the Word which I have spoken to you.” In this context, the word translated “clean” means a tree or branch that has been pruned, and He’s saying that they have already been pruned.

The preposition “διὰ - through” means that it is by means of Word, the one Jesus had spoken to them, that they are clean. Constant exposure to the Word of God, which happens most and best on Sunday morning, is what constantly shapes the Christian into what God has made us, and we do produce fruits. We act and talk like Christians, but not all the time.

If, at any time, when I say we act and talk differently, if anybody thinks I'm saying that Christians are perfect and without sin in and of themselves, then you've got the wrong end of the stick. Truly, Christians continue to sin until they die. It is also true that Christians should be discernable as Christians by the way they talk and act, which is all over the Bible.

To say that we talk and act like Christians is not to say we're perfect. Part of acting like a Christian is to realize that you are a sinner and to be a repentant sinner. Part of talking like a Christian is to confess those sins and plead for absolution. This talking happens regularly on Sunday morning. Part of acting like a Christian is to go to church on Sunday morning.

The verb “λελάληκα – spoken” is in the perfect tense, indicating action in the past with results enduring into the present time. What is it that has happened in the past? The Word had been spoken to these men, and it is “through the Word” that they have become Christians in the present time, and that faith endures indefinitely, as do their works.

Father Vinedresser is patient, but His patience has its limits, and the limit is reached when the individual, or the congregation, or the church body, or the nation, is not producing fruit. Then there is nothing left to do but to cut it off and burn it. With regard to the specific meaning of who it is who are cut off, we see in v. 16 that He's talking about “you,” plural.

That doesn't mean the application is limited to these Twelve, who He calls “branches,” but it certainly applies to one of them, Judas. They have just left the Sacrament, and the Eleven are headed to Gethsemane. Judas headed in a different direction, into the darkness. Not only is he not productive, but he is destructive, harming the Church and her fruit.

4. Moving now from descriptive speaking, the imperative prescriptively commands or invites the listener to “μείνατε ἐν ἐμοί, καὶ ἐγὼ ἐν ὑμῖν – remain in me, and I am in you,” an exhortation to the branch to stay connected to the vine; don't do anything – or fail to do things – that will cause the Father to cut you off from the Son. You need to stay connected.

Sometimes our religion is a very simple proposition. We Christians, individually and collectively, have won the spiritual lottery; we have been chosen before the foundation of the earth by the Almighty God to be His. Like the person who won the lottery, all you have to do is avoid losing it. The Church is the means of staying connected to that Almighty.

In that Church, we stay connected by being fed and nourished on Word and Sacrament, or to bring it down to even a more basic level; by going to church. Word and Sacrament is the connecting point of the Christian to the Christ. Those things happen in church, in the context of Divine Service, which is why, practically speaking, people should go to church.

I am a lifer in the LCMS, and I was schooled on the idea that you don't *have to* go to church to be a Christian; it was a common idea among many of the previous generation of pastors. This effectively gave us permission to separate God from church. Could this be at least part of the reason why my generation doesn't really see any great need to come to church?

And it seems as if we Boomers have passed it on to our children, only worse, because they see even less of a need for church attendance, and they even seem almost to not comprehend the concept that there is some connection between Christianity and church. Young Americans tend to be more spiritual – which can mean anything – but not very religious.

We were also taught that a Christian should *want* to go to church. Talk about church attendance as if it matters, as if you get something in Divine Service that you can't get anywhere else, that what you get here is a very important, the most important thing, the thing that lasts for eternity. Talk about all of those things because all of them are true.

5. One more “ἐγώ εἰμι – I am” and then a repetition of the assertion already made that Jesus is the vine. A lot of times Christians think that they are vines. We aren't. Three years ago, I said we are the branches. We are the fruit, and if that isn't clear enough, then how about this; “ὅτι χωρὶς ἐμοῦ οὐ δύνασθε ποιεῖν οὐδέν – without me you can do nothing.”

That's pretty blunt, and a lot of Christians don't want to hear it, mostly the Christians who want to tell you about “my faith,” who tend to be the same people who don't go to church much. A lot of Christians don't want to hear it, but if you stay in your lane and get out of His way, God can use you to produce a lot of fruit; you can do a lot of good in the world.

6. He now switches to the other possibility for the Christian; “ἐὰν μὴ τις μένη ἐν ἐμοί – whoever does not remain in me,” the one who does not heed the invitation to “remain” in Him, who will then be separated from Him. Again, Judas et al. Should such separation come, what happens to even the good branch if it should be separated from the vine?

It's pruning time on the farm, and there are all kinds of branches laying around all kinds of trees, and one day soon those branches will be united. From being nurtured and protected to being cut off, dried out, and then they will become fuel for a fire. Grape branches are particularly useless for anything other than producing grapes or being thrown into the fire.

7. As if speaking to the “once saved, always saved” theology of latter-day theologians, which is the idea that salvation cannot possibly be lost once it is found. Maybe that's the problem, they think that they actively “found” Jesus and so they will never want to “lose” Him – He speaks in conditional terms regarding the keeping of salvation once given.

He says “ἐὰν μένητε ἐν ἐμοί καὶ τὰ ῥήματά μου ἐν ὑμῖν μένη - if you abide in me and my word abides in you.” Both words “ἐάν – if” and the subjunctive “μένετε – you should

abide,” indicate that there is an option. We have seen the option; continue to abide in Him and you will live and produce fruit, or have the abiding discontinued and no fruit, only fire.

There is an upside for those who remain in Jesus. Part and parcel of remaining in Him is guarding His Word, and the upside is substantial; “ὃ ἐὰν θέλητε αἰτήσασθε καὶ γενήσεται ὑμῖν – whatever you (pl) want, ask, and it will be unto you.” We note that He’s speaking here not to a general audience, but to that particular group, the Twelve, sans Judas.

Nor does He address them as individual, but as a group, and He’s talking about requests made by the Apostles, now made by the Church, not by the individual Christian. For what does the Church pray? Look at the Lord’s Prayer and the Collects and Prayers in the hymnal to see the things for which the Church asks, the things that Jesus happily gives.

Not all prayer is appropriate Christian prayer. Perhaps the most glaring example is people praying to win the lottery, maybe even making deals with God to ensure the intervention of the Almighty. I don’t think it appropriate to pray for harm to come to an enemy, or that God give you something that would harm you, and don’t pray for illegal things to happen.

8. When “these things” happen, when people become and remain Christians, the Father is thereby glorified. It is noteworthy that the Father has had some moments of great glory; creation, the Red Sea crossing, various miracles, the Resurrection of Jesus, but arguably His greatest glory is in that He takes creatures like us and makes us creatures like Him.

Law/Gospel

False/True – I heard tell this past week of a person who was thinking of going to Hawaii to “find herself.” To be sure, there are several LCMS churches scattered throughout the islands, but Christianity doesn’t seem to have really taken there. In fact we met several mainlanders who moved there to find themselves and who did just that. Unfortunately, that is not the same as finding God, but is worse. The good news is that God has found us, that He has chosen us, that He abides in us and we in Him.

Not In/In – One who is not a Christian does not abide “in” Jesus, nor does Jesus abide in him. One who is a Christian abides in Jesus and Jesus in Him, a strong personal bond.

Sermon Titles

A Vintner Named Jesus

How Grapes Inform our Religion

Vines, Branches, and Grapes

How to Remain a Christian

Hymns

Abide with Me – LSB 878

Abide O Dearest Jesus – LSB 919

Chief of Sinners Though I Be – LSB 611

Rev. Steven L. Anderson
Pastor, Immanuel Lutheran Church
Grand Mound, Iowa

Resources

ACC – Manlio Simonetti, *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture* (Mark).
Intervarsity Press, 2002

BAG – Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Translated by
William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, University of Chicago Press, 1979

BCLY – William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark..* The Westminster Press, 1975

FGG – James W. Voelz, *Fundamental Greek Grammar*. Concordia Publishing House,
1993

MGM – W.F. Moulton, A.S. Geden, H.K. Moulton, *A Concordance to the Greek
Testament*. T & T Clark LTD., 1978

MM – James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek Testament*.
Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1982

ODCC – F.L. Cross, Editor, *Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*. Oxford University
Press, 1978

RNK – Fritz Rienecker, *A Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament*, Zondervan, 1976

RSV – Revised Standard Version of the Bible. Zondervan Publishing House, 1965

UBD – Merrill F. Unger, *Unger's Bible Dictionary*, Moody Press, 1977.

WP – A.T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, Baker, 1930

VINE – W.E. Vine, Merrill F. Unger, William White, Jr., *An Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*, Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1984

WIK – www.wikipedia.com

BIB – www.biblos.com

GBO – www.greekbible.com

Digital Classics Library - www.perseus.tufts.edu

Internet Classics Library – www.classics.mit.edu

Christian Classics Ethereal Library - www.ccel.org

Project Wittenberg - www.iclnet.org/pub/resources/text/wittenberg/wittenberg-home.html