

“Encouraging Words in Discouraging Times”

John 15:1-17

Here at the last night Jesus had with His disciples, hours before the crucifixion, He wants to leave them encouraging words because He has said some things that has disappointed them - some of which He has said before but they weren't listening.

'One of you will betray Me.' That was new. What they thought was a tight group of 12 was no longer. Someone they trusted couldn't be trusted.

'I am going away and where I am going you cannot come.' They understood He meant His death; something He had mentioned before but they didn't want to believe.

'I will send the Holy Spirit, who will be with you and in you. I will not leave you as orphans. I will come to you.'

While the last part is encouraging, it would also have been confusing. So if Jesus twice said 'Don't let your hearts be troubled, its because their hearts were troubled. At this point they leave the Upper Room and go for a walk eventually getting to the Garden of Gethsemane. As they walk Jesus uses a familiar agricultural scene in Israel of grape vines to explain His relationship with the Father and the disciples. The key point 'abide/remain in Me', commanding them about six times to remain in Him or His love.

For some believers these words have been confusing and not encouraging. The term 'abide in Me' has been used by some to teach that there's a special level of spirituality that only a few can reach if you want the 'abiding life'. It's very mystical sounding and sounds beyond our reach. But lets think about this for a second. If Jesus wanted to encourage His disciples when they were greatly discouraged, would He tell them something complicated? Most of these men were fishermen and farmers; ordinary people who performed manual labour and who weren't picked by the rabbis when they were 13-14 to be their apprentices.

So if Jesus uses a fishing or farming illustration who do you think will understand it best? So if Jesus knew His disciples would get it, I believe any one of us can understand this too. Because God is not the author of confusion. So then,

How Do We Abide in Christ? **(15:1-8)**

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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.

⁵ "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. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

This is the 7th "I am" statement of Jesus in John, each one a reference to His equal divine status with the Father who identified Himself to Moses as "I am who I am" in Ex.3:14. But why "I am the true vine"? Jesus' Jewish audience would have recognized what He was talking about. In the Old Testament God identifies Himself as the gardener who planted a vineyard (Israel) expecting fruit (obedience) yet it failed to produce. There are three key passages that say this - Ezek. 15; Is. 5:1-7 and Ps. 80:8-18. Look at Ps. 80.

Hear us, Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock. You who sit enthroned between the cherubim, shine forth ² before Ephraim, Benjamin and Manasseh. Awaken your might; come and save us.

³ *Restore us, O God; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*

⁴ *How long, LORD God Almighty, will your anger smolder against the prayers of your people?*

⁵ *You have fed them with the bread of tears; you have made them drink tears by the bowlful.*

⁶ *You have made us an object of derision to our neighbors, and our enemies mock us.*

⁷ *Restore us, God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*

⁸ *You transplanted a vine from Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it.*

⁹ *You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land.*

¹⁰ *The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches.*

¹¹ *Its branches reached as far as the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.*

¹² *Why have you broken down its walls so that all who pass by pick its grapes?*

¹³ *Boars from the forest ravage it, and insects from the fields feed on it.*

¹⁴ *Return to us, God Almighty! Look down from heaven and see! Watch over this vine,*

¹⁵ *the root your right hand has planted, the son you have raised up for yourself.*

¹⁶ *Your vine is cut down, it is burned with fire; at your rebuke your people perish.*

¹⁷ *Let your hand rest on the man at your right hand, the son of man you have raised up for yourself.*

¹⁸ *Then we will not turn away from you; revive us, and we will call on your name.*

¹⁹ *Restore us, LORD God Almighty; make your face shine on us, that we may be saved.*

The Psalm is a prayer for God the Shepherd to restore and save His vineyard - Israel. To look down from heaven and come and restore the fruitless vine through the son of Your right hand. This is why Jesus says 'I am the true vine'. And earlier He said I am the Good Shepherd, God's Son who has come down personally to save His people who refuse to follow Him; the very One who rescued them from Egypt and gave them their own land. How often did Jesus rebuke the religious leaders who failed to show the fruit of compassion and care for the people? Jesus is the answered prayer to Ps. 80. So to abide in Jesus is to abide in God. To believe He is the Son of God who alone can restore you to God. To initially abide means

We're united to Jesus through faith in His Word (v.1-3)

Jesus tells His disciples; you're the fruitful branches of Israel; go and produce fruit. These 11 (and others) have believed Jesus' words about who He is:

³ *You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*

This is also a reference to what He said earlier to Peter when He washed their feet, saying *And you are clean, though not every one of you.*" ¹¹ *For he knew who was going to betray him, and that was why he said not every one was clean.*

Judas did not place faith in Jesus. He saw and experienced firsthand the evidence of God's Word coming true in Jesus - who came to restore Israel and make His face shine on them - but he rejected Him. So he was removed. Removal of the branches is not a reference to losing your

salvation. Jesus clearly showed Judas was the example of those who hear the words of God, see the evidence through fellowship, answered prayer and teaching of the word of God and yet still reject Jesus. John himself makes this perfectly clear in his first letter in 1 John 2:19,

¹⁹ They [antichrists] went out from us, but they did not really belong to us. For if they had belonged to us, they would have remained with us; but their going showed that none of them belonged to us.

Every evangelical church has all had people who attended them regularly, heard the gospel, saw how the gospel changed lives around them, but eventually they chose not to accept the Word of God that showed Christ is Lord. They want to be their own Lord; master of their life. They didn't remain. The New Testament teaches that remaining in Jesus (being a follower) is evidence of being saved' not having made a onetime decision for Jesus. Many people have voiced those words with their lips but their hearts were never with God.

So that's where abiding begins and the evidence that you are growing in Jesus is shown by our continuing to

Depend on Jesus more as seen in visible Christ-like change (vv.4-6)

⁴ 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.⁵ "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. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned.

To remain/abide in Jesus is to learn to depend on Him for everything. Your salvation but also your everyday growth and needs. 'Don't be anxious about what you will eat or wear' Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount. The basic needs of life. 'Give us this day our daily bread (basic material needs) 'and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us and lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil' - our basic spiritual needs. Jesus is God's Son. He can meet all our needs. God even prunes those areas in our life that are not healthy (selfish) so we will learn to depend on Him more. Only when we depend on Him (who is the source of life) do we produce fruit. How do we know we're producing fruit?

Fruit is the external, visible evidence of internal growth. In other words we'll see us think and act more like Jesus. Are we a little more compassionate, patient, serving and forgiving than a year ago? If so it's because in those situations when we're challenged to be compassionate, patient, to serve or forgive its because we've heard the Spirit in the Word of God remind us who we are and how we should respond or act. This is how we grow:

We keep communicating; listening and praying (vv.7-8)

⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Abiding in Jesus means staying connected to Jesus. The more we listen to His Word the more the Spirit has to remind us of what we've read and heard. The more we obey his Word the more dependent we'll be on Jesus as shown in the need to pray to Him to help us in whatever area of our life we need help with. When we're staying close to Jesus, remaining in fellowship with Him, our prayers become more in tune with his and God's desires. We allow and use His Word in our prayers and we pray more for God's glory and will then our wants and will. Prayers that bring God glory are prayers that ask for God's will to be done. And we see that and want that as we allow His

Word to grow us; change our thought patterns and as a result our speech and our actions and reactions.

Those are the essentials to remaining with or abiding/growing in Jesus. In vv.9-17 we see the benefits of staying close to Jesus.

What are the Benefits of Abiding in Jesus? **(15:9-17)**

God prunes us to produce fruit so that we'll be more spiritually healthy. What does a spiritually healthy person gain as a result by walking in dependency with God and Jesus?

A healthy self-image rooted in God's love (vv.9-11)

⁹ "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. ¹⁰ If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love.

To remain in the Father's love is to depend on God's love for you. Because no one loves you more than God. He knows us better than anyone else. Better than we know ourselves. If God loves you for who you are then that's where our worth and value comes from. Not from our peers, not from our culture, not from our job or accomplishments or wealth or lack of wealth or health or lack of health. Not from our political, sexual or racial identities but from the Father's love who made us exactly who He meant for us to be. Our self-image comes from God, not from self.

¹¹ I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.

Everyone wants to be happy; to find joy in life. True joy is found in a relationship with God through Jesus who know exactly who we are and accept us for who we are but love us too much to leave us the way we are. Their purpose is to see us produce the evidence of Jesus in us which satisfies us the most. Yet, some Christians don't trust God enough to provide that. They don't trust God's promise to 'satisfy us in the morning with Your unfailing love that we sing for joy and be glad all our days.' God's unfailing love is His covenant commitment to us. Remind your self every morning that God loves you and remains with you even when we're not remaining abiding in Him.

But if God loves me unconditionally He also loves all His followers unconditionally. God make us to enjoy each of us together because we need encouragement. Another benefit of abiding in Jesus is God connects us to

Mutually supporting spiritual relationships (vv.12-15)

The "you" in '*Your joy is complete*' is plural. Yes for each one of you but together.

¹² My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. ¹³ Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends. ¹⁴ You are my friends if you do what I command. ¹⁵ I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you.

Once again we see Jesus remind His followers to love each other as Jesus loves them. If God accepts each one of us and forgives each one of us and works with each one of us then we are to do the same together. If I am Jesus' friend, so are you. Then I should not only accept you in Jesus but serve you in Jesus. And when we serve each other and together, we experience His joy together. Our

relationship with Jesus is not only Lord to servant but servant to servant and friend to friend. Yes, He's still my Lord and I must obey Him, but He does not boss me around and order me to serve. He sets the example and serves right beside you and me.

That's the word picture He gave His followers when He washed their feet. Serve one another as a team. And Jesus learned this from His Father. What kind of image do many people have of God? An angry, overbearing parent who is ready to punish us when we blow it. Yet that is not the image in the Bible. A serving, sacrificial God who loves us and demonstrates His own love toward us that even while we were yet sinners sent His Son to die for us.

And remaining in Jesus also gives us

A content and purpose-filled life (vv.16-17)

¹⁶ You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you so that you might go and bear fruit—fruit that will last—and so that whatever you ask in my name the Father will give you. ¹⁷ This is my command: Love each other.

Jesus said He chose us to be saved and chose us to serve. And if the God of this universe chose us to be one of His disciples then we realize we have a divine purpose to life. A purpose that has eternal ramifications. Remain in Jesus; believing His Words, depending on Him for all our need and problems, keep the communication lines open by listening to His words and then praying those same words back to Him so He can answer our God-centered prayers.

As His disciples we recognize we have a divine, eternal purpose that by producing the evidence of Jesus in us (by thinking and speaking and acting more like Jesus) we can work together to help a culture of confused self-images and purposeless lives to find hope and joy and peace through a relationship with Jesus. And then through their fruit producing lives they can show others who struggle with self-image issues and see no purpose to life to find God's purpose for their life.

Yes, Jesus spoke these words to His discouraged disciples who were troubled about His coming death and departure. These words spoke hope, joy and purpose to them. By Pentecost Sunday these same discouraged disciples took Jesus words and spoke hope and purpose to thousands of others who responded to Jesus' life-giving words.

But these words are also for all disciples to share with the directionless, purposeless and confused people of our generation, to help them see God's purpose for them. Do you know anyone like that? Of course we do. Are we remaining in Jesus and producing Jesus-looking fruit that is helping us see the needs of those around us or are we not seeing them through God's eyes because of a lack of abiding in the true vine, who gives spiritual health and life?

Ask Jesus to show you how you could abide more so you show Jesus more to others. And pray that we would be bold in showing and sharing the life-changing of Jesus Christ to purposeless and identity confused people we know to help them see God made them and wants them to find true hope, joy and love through Jesus.

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If you have any comments or questions about this sermon please contact us
at olivvet@rideau.net