

Gospel of John – April 3, 2022

[PRAY]

My wife, Olivia, celebrate our **fifth wedding anniversary** in May. I know, right? Five whole years... if you need any advice, let me know.

Just kidding. We're obviously still pretty new at this.

But as you can imagine, with a big milestone like five years, I've been doing a lot of **reflecting** at how much we've grown and experienced and learned since 2017.

One of the coolest things I see happening is **how our lives are being knitted together** with each passing year.

Obviously we're developing inside jokes, learning how to be good roommates, and learning to avoid each other's pet peeves.

But more than that, I'm seeing how we are discovering **a shared purpose as a couple**. Shared passions. Shared convictions.

You may know that we both love animals and caring for creation. It started with one adopted rescue bunny, and now we're slowly turning this run-down 10 acre farm into a mini Eden with all kinds of rescued creatures running around and fruits and vegetables growing all over the place.

We share that mission. And even when we face challenges in this (for example, last month we lost two of our hens, which was awful) - these challenges deepen our resolve about what we are here to do as a couple.

It's only been 5 years, but I'm learning what it means **to share another's joy**, to share another's sorrow... what it means for two lives to become one. An experience of mutual love. **Shared, interwoven love.**

I know not everyone has had this experience in marriage, and believe me - I was **single** till I was 34, so I know how annoying it can be when other people talk about their "happy marriages" when that's something you desire.

But maybe you've had this experience in another kind of relationship. With a deep friendship, or with a sibling, or a parent, or a child... where your lives shape each other's and you become like each other in some ways. Mutual love. Lives woven together.

I bring this up because I believe that **this is the *kind* of relationship we are meant to develop with Jesus.**

Not just a divine being and a mortal who believes in him. Not just a sinner and a savior.

But **two individuals being interwoven to become one.** Sharing joy, sharing sorrow, sharing passions, sharing purpose... We are invited to experience *mutual love* with Jesus.

But I didn't just make that up. It's something Jesus himself says in the gospel of John. Let me show you.

THE VINEYARD OF GOD

Please grab a Bible and turn to **John 15:1, page _____.**

[Project Eden: Indy Creation Fest April 23 (**image: Creation Fest**)]

So here we are, back at **the last supper** - the last night between Jesus and his disciples before the crucifixion, where we get an insight into the very core of Jesus' identity and what he cares about the most.

As we saw last week, Jesus began the dinner by performing a shocking act of self-giving love. He lowered himself and **washed his disciples' feet.**

And now we're going to see a bit of what Jesus began to teach his disciples after that.

John 15:1-4

I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from

the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me.

“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener.”

If we want to understand this teaching of Jesus, we have to understand the context. Grapevines were a significant image for the Israelites. All throughout the Bible we see an ongoing metaphor of the people of God being a grapevine or vineyard.

The temple had grapevines carved all over it, they had grapevines on their coins... **Israel saw themselves as the vineyard of God.**

Which is why, when things in Israel were really going astray, the **Old Testament prophets** used this image to convey how badly the people had messed up. Like this very influential passage in Isaiah:

Isaiah 5:1-2, 7

Now I will sing for the one I love

a song about his vineyard:

My beloved had a vineyard

on a rich and fertile hill.

He plowed the land, cleared its stones,

and planted it with the best vines.

In the middle he built a watchtower

and carved a winepress in the nearby rocks.

Then he waited for a harvest of sweet grapes,

but the grapes that grew were bitter...

The nation of Israel is the vineyard of the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

The people of Judah are his pleasant garden.

He expected a crop of justice,

but instead he found oppression.

He expected to find righteousness,

but instead he heard cries of violence.

In other words, God created Israel to bear **the sweet fruit of his intentions in the world:** justice, righteousness, life, peace, abundance.

But instead, the people spread *injustice*, evil, violence, pain... The vineyard of God was producing **bitter grapes**.

Isaiah's not the only place we see this metaphor. It gets picked up in the Psalms, Ezekiel talks about useless vines being thrown in the fire, etc.

And then we come to Jesus, and he also uses this image. But look what he says.

The Father is the gardener, just like Isaiah 5, but Jesus calls *himself* "the *true* grapevine..." That word "true" in Greek means ***genuine, real...***

He's saying, "Yes, the vineyard of God has produced a lot of bitter fruit. But I am the true vine, the genuine vine. **I grow the way God intended.**"

"And you, my followers, are my branches. **The fruit you produce through me is sweet.** It's the fruit that God desires."

But, as he says in verse 4, our fruitfulness depends on one thing: *remaining* in him. A branch that is severed from the vine will not bear fruit.

This probably goes without saying, but **what is the point of growing a grapevine?** To get *grapes*, right?

If you cut a branch off of a grapevine, that branch can't do the thing it was designed to do. **The purpose of a branch is not to just exist, it's to bear fruit.**

Well, according to Jesus, the same thing is true for us. Our purpose is not just to *be*, but to be fruitful – **the fruit of God's intentions for the world.**

But for that to happen, we must *remain* in him - connected to the *true* vine **so our fruit is sweet.**

Ok, but what does it mean to *remain*? Well, let's keep reading and explore it.

BEARING FRUIT

John 15:5-8

Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.

Anyone who does not remain in me is thrown away like a useless branch and withers. Such branches are gathered into a pile to be burned. But if you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted! When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father.

There it is again. “Those who *remain* in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit.”

So let’s talk about that word, “remain.” In Greek, it’s the word,

menō - abide/remain/dwell/stay

In terms of location, it’s how you’d refer to ‘staying in a certain town for a while’ or ‘living with your extended family.’ In terms of a relationship, it’s similar. It’s like, ‘keep things how they are,’ ‘don’t change a thing,’ ‘keep on keeping on.’

But here, Jesus is doing something interesting. The **verb form** he uses isn’t passive. It’s not, “hey, if you feel like it you should stick around...” No, it’s *active*.

He makes it clear that *remaining* in him requires **an act of the will**. It’s something we choose to do. Continuously. It’s something we give ourselves over to. Remain... Abide... Dwell in me.

But notice this. Even as Jesus is calling his followers to this *active* abiding in him, he makes it clear that **it goes both ways**. Verse 4, verse 5, verse 7... If we remain in *him*, he remains in *us*. We dwell and abide in him and he dwells and abides in us.

It is what you might call ***mutual indwelling***. It’s an active choice on our part, but it’s met by an active choice on his.

I spoke about my **marriage** a moment ago. The same concept is at work there. We are **growing together in mutual love**.

If you see a marriage where **only one partner** is moving toward the other or growing in love or putting in the work, it’s going to be a real

uphill battle for that marriage to survive.

Healthy marriages - *all* healthy relationships for that matter - require **both parties to be invested**, abiding in one another, growing in trust, developing *mutual* love. This is how genuine relationships work.

That's what Jesus is saying. He will remain in us. That's a promise. But we've got to *choose* to remain in him for that relationship to grow.

And to get back to our operating metaphor here: **This is how we'll bear fruit.**

How we'll fulfill the purpose of our life. Not just to exist, not just to wander through our days alone, but to bear the sweet fruit of living in mutual love with the Son of God. Branches connected to the vine.

Alright, so *how* exactly do we do this? How do we remain in him? And what exactly *is* the fruit we'll produce if we do? Let's read just a few more verses to find out.

MUTUAL LOVE

John 15:9-13

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love. When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love, just as I obey my Father's commandments and remain in his love. I have told you these things so that you will be filled with my joy. Yes, your joy will overflow! This is my commandment: Love each other in the same way I have loved you. There is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends.

Let's answer that first question. How do we remain in Jesus? Well, he tells us in verse 10. "When you obey my commandments, you remain in my love..."

And what does he command? Verse 12. "This is my commandment: Love each other *in the same way* I have loved you."

This is exactly what we talked about last week when **Jesus washed his disciples' feet**. He took the position of a servant. He lifted them up whether they deserved it or not. And then he told them this:

John 13:14-15

Since I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you ought to wash each other's feet. I have given you an example to follow. Do as I have done to you.

Self-giving love, setting ourselves aside... this is what Jesus expects of his followers. To love the way that he loves.

That is *how* we remain and abide and dwell with him. And it's how he remains and abides and dwells with us. **We do what he does.**

We see the world through his eyes. We love the world with his heart. We serve the world with his hands. We experience mutual indwelling, mutual love with our savior.

And guess what starts to happen? We start to bear fruit. We're grafted into the true vine and our lives begin fulfilling **the very purpose for which we were born**. Our destiny.

Not to just exist, but to bear the sweet fruit of God's intentions: justice, righteousness, mercy, peace, love... Not just in us, but *through* us. Healing the broken world around us.

That is when we are filled with joy. Verse 11. "Yes, your joy will overflow."

Why? Because it's not our joy, it's *his*. "You'll be filled with *my joy*." It's *mutual joy*. **Joy as we see the world *he* created becoming what it was meant to be *through us*.**

God the Father is the gardener. He's plowed the land and cleared the stones and built the watchtower. Jesus Christ is the true vine the Father planted in this fertile ground. You and I are the branches, and **we get to bear his fruit as we dwell together in love.**

REFLECTION

It's a beautiful image, isn't it? So let's talk about what to do with it.

I have two reflections I want to share based on all of this: **one for us as a church, and one for you, individually.**

First, look back at verse 7. “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, you may ask for anything you want, and it will be granted!”

Maybe you saw that verse and thought, “Wait, what? Really?”

“Anything I want? Uhhh... I wish for a million dollars. No, wait! I wish for more wishes!”

Right? It sounds like something **a genie** would say. But that’s not what Jesus means here.

First of all, this doesn’t really show up in English, but **when he says “you” in this verse, it’s plural.**

“If *you all* remain in me... *you all* may ask...”

What he’s describing here is not individuals making wishes. He’s talking about **the collective desire of his followers.** The community of disciples. The Church.

When the community of faith abides in him, when his words - his teachings, his commands - remain in us, *then* we can ask for anything we want and it will be granted.

But think about what we just talked about: mutual indwelling, mutual love.

As Olivia and I have grown in our marriage, we’ve started to **desire the things that would be best for one another.** We long for the *other* person’s happiness. We are overjoyed by *each other’s* joy. That’s mutual love. And we’re growing in that.

Now imagine if that same thing was happening between Jesus and his followers. Between Jesus and Grace Church.

Imagine: If we are a community that is abiding in Christ, loving the way he loves, being nourished by the true vine... and if, as he promises, he is at the

same time abiding in us, and dwelling in us...

Then guess what begins to take place. **What do we start to desire as a church?**

If Jesus is abiding in us and we're abiding in him we don't want nicer buildings and flashier worship and more money and fame...

No! We want transformed lives and healed relationships and a community that makes room for one another and truth and dignity and justice in our world.

We want what he wants.

When we remain grafted into the true vine, then of course he's going to give us what we ask for, because it will be **exactly what he desires too**. Our church becomes interwoven with him.

So Grace Church, let's learn what it means to abide in Christ as a community. Let's learn the way of self-giving love that he showed us. **Let's learn how to want what he wants so we can bear the fruit of his intentions in this world.**

RELATIONSHIP WITH CHRIST

But of course, all this talk of abiding in Jesus and mutual love... it's not just a communal thing. It's also an intensely personal one.

I mentioned before that the word "abide" here is *active*, intentional... it's an act of the will.

So let me ask you, how are you doing at **actively remaining in Christ**? Sharing in mutual love with him... seeking to bear the sweet fruit of *his* intentions?

It's so easy to think of following Jesus as a **to-do list of beliefs** to check off. Or a **moralistic religion** to obey (do the right things *or else*).

It's easy to think of it as a **status**. "I'm a Christian... I'm an Evangelical... I go to church."

But following Jesus is really none of those things. **Following Jesus is a relationship.**

A relationship with a real person. A real person with emotions and dreams and passions... A real person who wants to speak with you and weep with you and rejoice with you.

Just like a lifelong friendship or a marriage. It's a relationship.

Truly following Jesus means having your life interwoven with his. Growing in mutual love.

And here's what I want you to hear: wherever you are on your faith journey. Whether you have a deep, rich relationship with Jesus that goes back decades, or whether you aren't even sure he's real:

Jesus wants to dwell more deeply with you.

Just as he says in verse 9:

John 15:9

I have loved you even as the Father has loved me. Remain in my love.

Again, wherever you are in your faith journey, know that Jesus is ready and waiting to go *deeper*. **Do you believe it?**

Speak to him. Tell him what you fear. Tell him what you love. Tell him what you're dreaming of.

And then listen. Listen for his voice. Listen for his correction. Listen for who *he* says you are.

Abide in Christ and he will abide in you.

Remain connected to the true vine, and let's see how fruitful your life can really be...

[PRAY]