

“Remain in the Vine”

John 15:1-17

(Hold up a branch with green leaves, and one that is brown and dry.) Which of these two branches is dead? Trick question! They both are. Both of these branches have been severed from the main tree, so neither of them can grow. Of course, one shows signs of having been dead longer, but give the green branch some time, and its destiny will be the same.

We are like branches; we are designed to stay connected to others. The trouble is, many of us are not. I read a book recently called “Refrigerator Rights” by my friend, psychologist and pastor, Dr. Will Miller. He wrote how many people lack significant relationships. Literally, less and less people have the right to “raid our refrigerators” if they ever came to our homes. Dr. Will observed that many of us feel anxious and discontent with life. This is what he concludes:

...The core emotional problem of modern life is...a pervasive personal detachment...from other people... We no longer live in physical or emotional closeness to the people who helped shape us...It’s not just about moving away. It’s about being away, being apart, being isolated, and being too alone. It is about the loss of refrigerator rights with others. (Dr. Will Miller and Glenn Sparks, Refrigerator Rights, [New York: Berkley, 2002], 11.)

We were formed for relationships – with God and with other people. When we disconnect from either, we become dry and withered. The question I want to answer today is, how do we stay connected? How do we stay alive, spiritually and emotionally?

Fortunately, Jesus tells us how in John 15. This passage is a record of the last conversation Jesus had with his disciples the night before he died. It’s serious. This is his parting shot, his final will and testament, his last words before

facing the cross. We know that he chose his words very carefully. Jesus needed something memorable, an image they could all understand to stay connected to him. Many times in his ministry, Jesus’ disciples walked through the fields and vineyards. Even on the way up to the Mount of Olives to pray, they passed grapevines and olive trees. Everywhere they went, they saw growing things, things they could eat and sustain themselves with.

So Jesus chose the image of a grapevine to demonstrate the most important principle that his disciples would ever learn. All of us have one task to do, from which flows all others. One thing to do to sustain us, enliven us, and bear fruit for God. We are to remain in Jesus.

Jesus says remaining connected to him is the most important thing we can do in this life. Some bible translations say “remain”; others use the word “abide.” Jesus says in John 15:5, “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.” Christ, the author of life, is the main vine or trunk, and we the branches, the part where the fruit is supposed to grow. In order to produce, we must stay connected to the main vine, to Jesus. The vine provides water and nourishment so that the whole plant can produce fruit.

Now to be clear, the kind of fruit we are talking about would not literally go in your refrigerator. It’s better than that. We can produce the Fruit of the Spirit – love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. (Galatians 5:22-23) We can produce the fruit of generosity. (2 Corinthians 9:6-8) We can have fruitful, fulfilling relationships, with God and with each other. We can see the fruits of a healthy church: new people becoming disciples of Christ and members in the local church; addictions being healed;

marriages being saved; the hungry being fed; the environment being protected; the world finding peace. This is the fruit Jesus wants for us.

Common sense tells us, dry, dead branches don't grow. You can try planting them; at best, you'll have an easily broken fence. Ironically, fences are built to be barriers to keep others out, not to sustain satisfying relationships. Dry brittle wood basically only has one purpose – as fuel. You can burn it. Maybe you can roast marshmallows on it. But you cannot grow anything from it.

Jesus gives us a choice: remain in him, in order to grow and produce, or be separated and become cold, dry, and bitter. These are stark, contrasting images. Jesus even mentions fire, which can often indicate judgment. Yet I find this passage is less of a warning and more of a natural process. Either a vine grows fruit, or it is discarded. No farmer would want to keep plants that do not produce. We want them for fruit, not firewood. That is their original purpose.

Notice the end of John 15:5. Apart from Jesus, you can do nothing. He doesn't say, “You can only do a little. You can only produce some fruit.” No. Absolutely nothing. Yet if we remain in him, we will naturally produce fruit.

So the question we need to answer is, how do we abide? How do we remain in Jesus?

There are two things Jesus says, and they are intimately related: Love and Obey. In John 15:9, Jesus says we are first and foremost to remain in his love. In other words, stay in love with Jesus. Let his love embrace you, and respond to his love. Jesus' gift of love is freely offered. He gave up his life for you. You simply have to receive this gift and constantly thank Jesus for his love for you.

The second thing we must do is obey Christ's commands. He says in John 15:10, if we keep his commands, we will remain in his love. Essentially, these are

two sides of the same coin. The love Jesus is talking about is practical; it is set in motion and reinforced when we do the things he calls us to. Things like: Love God, love others; Give; Pray; Confess; Honor God with your life, your choices, your resources; Love your enemies. Jesus once said that those who listened to his words and obeyed them were like a wise man who built his house on a rock. (Matthew 7:24-27) If we are to stay in love with Jesus, we cannot just pay him lip service. We cannot just say, “Jesus is my Lord,” and then do whatever we want. We cannot proclaim, “Jesus is a good teacher,” and not obey his lessons. We must follow him to remain in him.

Jesus wants us to produce fruit. He does not want our lives to be dry and empty. Jesus also will do whatever it takes to produce the kind of fruit he desires in our lives. In John 15:2, Jesus says, “every branch that does bear fruit [God] prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.” Don’t be afraid of pruning. Pruning and discarding may initially look the same, but they have completely different purposes. The farmer only discards something because it is dead and cannot produce fruit. The farmer prunes something because it is alive, growing, and thriving, and can produce even more.

In this passage, the same word for pruning also means cleansing (*kathairo*). Jesus knows when sin is disrupting our relationship with him. You cannot produce holy fruit when you are struggling with sin. Isaiah 59:2 says that our sin is a barrier that separates us from God. We need to confess to be clean. And Jesus promises that his word cleanses us. If you look at your own life, and wonder why you are not producing fruit, why your relationships are not fulfilling, why God seems so distant, ask yourself, “Do I need to confess and be cleansed? Is God

pruning me to remove bad habits that get in the way of the fruit I should produce?” It takes courage to ask that question.

Jesus does not command us because he wants to control us. In fact, John 5:11 says that Jesus wants us to have his joy. His joy is made complete in us when we remain in him, obey him, and produce fruit that pleases God. Remaining in Christ means that we have special access to the Father. Jesus says we can ask God for anything. That’s incredible! Think about the level of trust that must exist for you to petition God. You wouldn’t dare ask someone you didn’t trust intimately. You would never ask a god you did not believe in, and you shouldn’t.

Abiding in Christ means going deep in our relationship with him. Practically, it means committing to worship, prayer, reading scripture and serving. It means taking advantage of the means of grace that God provides. It means taking risks, even being part of a community of faith when you don’t 100% agree with the structure. Abiding is not like checking off a to-do list. It’s not, “Well, I read three Bible verses Bible today. See ya tomorrow, Jesus!” No! Christ is our first priority; he is our only priority. Everything flows from that relationship.

If you do not have an abiding relationship with Christ, it is impossible to please God. You will try to produce on your own and end up failing, stressed, lonely, and miserable.

If you don’t know Christ, let me ask you this: Do you want fulfillment? Do you want purpose? Do you want forgiveness, release, and peace? Do you want healthy relationships? If you only look for these things the world, seeking and consuming pleasure at the expense of others, you won’t find lasting fulfillment. Instead, you will only find things like addiction, immorality, rampant consumption

– things that not only harm yourself, they harms others, the environment, and the world. You will become dry, bitter, and empty.

However, you can choose the relationship that lasts forever. You can choose to love Jesus. You can confess, repent, and find that through the forgiveness of your sins, you will love others and produce fruit that lasts.

To those who have already said yes to Jesus, let me ask you, are you abiding? Are you still connected? If you are, you don't have to worry about your fruit. An organic relationship with Jesus will naturally produce the fruits of love. It's a life cycle: you meet Jesus, love Jesus, serve others and bear fruit. As a result, new people meet Jesus, fall in love with Jesus, and bear fruit themselves. That is how the church grows, naturally.

Outside it's warm. Growing things are green. Inside, we see new life, too. New members joined this congregation today. Even when I am depart next week for my new appointment, we can be connected. Not through the local church. That relationship will end. After June 30th, I will no longer be your pastor. Dan Phillips will be your new shepherd. If Bellaire Community UMC is our only connection, we will be cut off and wither. But if Christ is our connection, we will remain and grow.

I hope that you will choose to remain in Christ always. Stay connected to the one who makes our relationships grow, our churches grow, and our lives fruitful.

Let us pray.