

“I AM and New Way of Life”

John 15:1-6; Isaiah 5:1-7; Jeremiah 31:31-34

November 16, 2025/Jazz Sunday

1st Presbyterian Church of Sharon

By Rev. Dr. Glenn Hink

I. Text

Read John 15:1-5

II. Introduction

“I AM.” In Hebrew it’s “Yahweh.” “Ego Eimee” in Greek. A name not spoken by some due to respect and mystery. “I AM;” the holy name of God.

John has a story to tell about Jesus. It’s a late 1st C story, an early follower of Jesus story, an early church story. It’s a thoughtful reflection by those earliest Christians on the life of Jesus. It’s a testimony about how they came to experience the power and plan and person of God, the eternal “I AM,” in Jesus. And so John will use the holy name of God to tell the story of what they believe about Jesus.

“I AM.” As we have discovered over the past few Sundays, some of the “I AM” statements in John just seem to have more depth and energy:

“I AM...the light of the world”...cosmic, eternal, power;

“I AM...the good shepherd”...care and comfort;

“I AM...the resurrection and life”...hope and the promise of new life in the face of all the types of deaths we face.

But “I AM...the true vine?” What is John saying about their experience with Jesus here?

III. Brief Exegesis

The image of “the vine” is an allegory. It invites us to wonder and ask questions. And today is Jazz Sunday. Jazz suggests a flow of going back and forth. So I thought it would be interesting to shape a sermon that goes back and forth with questions and answers. A “jazz type” of sermon. So I’ve asked Bill to help me with the “back and forth.” Imagine Bill is “the string bass,” and I’m “the drums.”

Question #1-Jesus said, “I AM the true vine.” Vine? Why does he say that? Did the image of a vine come from somewhere? Or was Jesus just walking around, saw a grape vine, and thought it would be a good illustration?

Answer #1-Indeed, Jesus could have just been walking around and saw a vineyard. People in the ancient Middle East were familiar with grape vines. Many grew grapes, or had friends or family who grew grapes, or helped out in a vineyard themselves. A vineyard, grapes and making wine; it was just part of everyday life. So everyone knew what Jesus was talking about when he mentioned a vineyard.

And everyone also knew a vineyard was a metaphor for God’s people, Israel. It’s in the Psalms and the prophets, including the reading from Isaiah 5 this morning. As a vineyard God’s people were to produce good grapes, lead good lives, and share in God’s good plans for the world. So the image of a vineyard has a long history. I think Jesus also has this in mind.

But when Jesus claims “I AM the true vine,” he is redefining the image. In all the references God begins with a good vineyard, but then something goes terribly wrong. The vineyard fails to produce good grapes; God’s people fail to share in God’s good plans for the world. When all other people, prophets, kings, movements, powers, revivals, and countries fail, Jesus does not. So in contrast to the vineyards that have gone wild, Jesus is “the true vine.” All the plans, power, and person of God for the salvation of the world in the kingdom of God now come to rest in Jesus Christ. He is “the true vine.” It is a bold statement. That’s the story John is telling about Jesus.

Question #2-Ok. There’s a lot going on when Jesus says “I AM the true vine.” It is a bold statement. He’s saying God’s plans for salvation and life for the world are found in him. But what does it mean to “abide?” Branches, I assume that means believers, are to abide in the vine, that is Jesus. How do I do that? How do I “abide?”

Answer #2-If you cut a branch off the vine, what happens? It withers. It dries up. It has no future. Why? Because it’s cut off from the source of life, the vine.

To “abide” is to stay connected to the vine, Jesus Christ. It’s to believe Jesus is Savior and Lord. It’s to follow his way of life. It’s choosing to read the Bible, share in worship, and practice prayer. It’s choosing to love, to share, and to forgive. It’s to share in the life of a Christian community, a church, and encourage each other. “Abiding” is about the choices we make.

It can be hard to “abide.” We live in a noisy, busy age. We have to make lots of different choices. We have many different ways to spend our time and energy. We have full schedules. We often try to add “just one more thing,” and then find we’re exhausted. “Abiding” can seem like too much, too slow, maybe too old fashioned for some people.

But “abiding” is also about trust. It’s trusting that there really is a God of the universe, and this God loves me. And that my life has more meaning and purpose when I have a relationship with this God; life makes more sense, I find peace, I have hope. That’s “abiding.”

And when we “abide” God changes our lives. That’s the great insight the prophet Jeremiah had in our reading from Jeremiah 31. On my own I can’t transform my life. On my own I can’t live in God’s ways. On my own I fail. But through “abiding,” God changes my life. It’s like a switch is turned “on,” and I begin to live in new ways of life. Eternal life begins to “spill into” this life now. That’s abiding.

Question #3-But what about “pruning.” That doesn’t sound good to me. Why would I want to “abide in the vine,” believe, follow Jesus, and have my life changed, if it involved pruning?

Answer #3-Years ago on the west side of the church there used to be a couple of large rose bushes. At one time they may have been beautiful. But over the years they had just been “let go.” And so they grew wild. They grew in upon themselves. Flowers became fewer. Thorns became larger. They got tall and angry looking. Rather than stopping to “smell the roses,” you just “stayed clear” of those wild plants. They looked more like a prehistoric weapon than a thing of beauty. It happens when roses aren’t pruned. We had Cottage Gardens take them out when the west side was relandscaped. I would imagine it was not an easy job.

I think it’s a similar thing with grapevines. That’s what “pruning” is about. It’s about the cutting away of all the things in life that waste life, that are unproductive, that hurt ourselves and others. “Pruning” can mean the cutting away of addictions to things like gambling, alcohol or work. “Pruning” can mean the cutting away of our misdirected loves of money, things, and popularity. “Pruning” can mean the cutting away of all the brokenness we carry with us, like guilt, shame, hurts, and disappointments. “Abiding in the true vine,” believing and following Jesus Christ, means those things are “pruned” out of our lives, and we’re free to live better, bigger lives.

Question #4-Well, that makes it sound like “pruning” isn’t so bad. If fact, it sounds like a good thing. I suppose it can be scary at times, because change can be scary. But still a good thing.

So one last question. John 15 also mentions “fruit.” Branches in the vine are to produce fruit. I think it means that branches in the vine are to produce grapes. And in your story rose bushes are to produce flowers. But what are followers of Jesus supposed to produce? What kind of “fruit” should my life produce? What does “fruit” mean?

Answer #4-“Fruit” is a way to talk about a direction in life, character, what we do, and how we do it. It’s about how we spend our lives, what we give and share and leave others. Most simply, and most powerfully, people who believe and follow Jesus find their lives change to produce the “fruit” of love.

And this fruit, this love, is not just about feeling. Rather, it’s more about action. It’s about the action of loving God and loving our neighbors. Loving God means worship, prayer, song, looking for God in everyday experiences, and seeing God in the face of others. Loving neighbors means caring, helping, forgiving, patience, laughing, sharing good things rather than gossip, and doing the right thing because it’s the right thing. “Fruit” is about living the way of God we see in

Jesus. And it is often very different that the way of life around us. It takes courage to produce fruit. But it changes the world.

IV. Brief Reflection

The true vine, abiding, pruning, and fruit; it's the salvation plans of God in Jesus Christ. "I AM...the true vine, and you are...the branches." That's what going on in this "I AM" saying. Out of all the choices and ways of life we can live, it's an invitation to believe, change, and share love. It's an invitation to a certain way of life, together.

I think it's a little like this. I grew up in Washington State; first the eastside and then the Seattle area. I then lived in Richmond, VA for 3 years. And now I've been in Western PA for 35 years. I'm American. I know some of the history. I know some of the songs. I've traveled so I know some of the places. I know some of the different cultures in Seattle and Richmond, Pittsburgh and the Shenango Valley. I know some of the different foods and national parks and politics. I've lived in America. I've "abided" in America. I've settled down in America. So that has shaped my life.

But suppose when I retire, I decide to move to the Netherlands. I have some Dutch DNA. And I've been to Amsterdam; it's beautiful and filled with art. And by living in a new place, I would learn some of the history. I would learn to sing some of the songs. I would learn some Dutch or German or both. I would become familiar with the food. I would learn the culture and the politics and the places of beauty. To live in the Netherlands, I would change. It's a different country. Some things about me would stay the same, but some would be different. I would "abide" in the Netherlands. I would settle in. And that would change my life.

The true vine, branches, pruning, and fruit; it's like living in a different country. That's what this story in John is about. It's being the vineyard God has always dreamed about. And living together the way of God's salvation for the world.

Appropriately, there is a vine around the top of the sanctuary. Maybe you've never noticed it before this morning. But it's there, reminding us who we are; how we live together; what we believe. Jesus is the true vine...and we are the branches. It's a good way of life.