

We are continuing this morning in our mini sermon series called Rooted and Growing, looking at ways that Scripture uses the analogy of a tree, or a tree-like image to examine or explain various aspects of our formation and walk with Christ.

And last week I told you that we were going to be looking at this passage in John 15 again this week. This is part two of looking at Jesus as the True Vine and exploring this deeply spiritual concept of being branches who are grafted into Him.

So we're going to re-read the same passage, but we'll look at it from a different angle this morning.
Read John 15:1-9.

In his book, "The Deeply Formed Life," Pastor Rich Villodas wrote about his experience with Redwood Trees in California. Some of you might remember this story from our Thanksgiving service last year. Please bear with me; I'm going to share it again. Because it was a major inspiration for our new logo.

He writes this: "On a recent speaking trip to the San Francisco area, my family and I spent a weekend at a camp that was surrounded by what seemed like an endless number of redwood trees. When we first encountered these majestic trees on our drive to the camp, I gasped in wonder and amazement.

"I'm a city guy. I'm used to tall buildings and crowded streets. But seeing these tall trees crammed together like New York City subway riders during rush hour opened up something in my soul."

"After settling in our cottage, we walked around the campgrounds. For fifteen minutes, I walked with my head craned upward, contemplating these trees that were as tall as two hundred feet. I would learn that some redwood trees grow up to almost four hundred feet, similar to a thirty-seven-story building. It was almost too much for me to take in.

"What I learned about redwood trees.... [is that] these redwood trees are centered and strong because their roots are robustly intertwined with each other. The roots often go only five or six feet deep, but they extend outward up to a hundred feet from the trunk. Each tree is deeply sustained by the larger, wider system of roots that provides stability, enabling them to grow high into the sky.

"As I learned this new information and studied redwood trees further, I came to the realization that a redwood tree is the core metaphor for Christian spiritual formation that we need in our day. God longs for us to be fully alive, soaring into the sky and bearing witness to God's good life that is available to us.

"But if we hope to be shaped and changed in this way of life, we must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together."

We must have a root system powerful enough to hold us together. A system that is held together by the Root of Jesse—that is deeply connected to the Vine, as we talked about last week. And our rootedness with one another grows and deepens and thickens *because of* our rootedness in Him.

So I want to do two things this morning: 1) remind us of what it means to abide in Christ, to be anchored and connected into Christ, and then 2) what that means for us collectively as the branches.

Jesus says in verse 5: “*I am the vine; you are the branches.*” In other words, don’t get those two things confused. “*If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.*”

A couple of weeks ago, Pastor Martin was leading our staff devotional, and he quoted a passage from John 1 where Jesus is starting to call some of his disciples. And two of the disciples of John the Baptist hear him called Jesus, “The Lamb of God,” and they start to follow Jesus.

So Jesus turns around and asks them, “*What do you want?*” Or more literally, “What are you seeking?”

And rather than answering his question, interestingly they throw a question back at Jesus and ask him, “*Rabbi, where you staying?*” Where are you staying? At first it seems like a rather strange question to ask in response to Jesus’ question—as if they’re asking him what hotel he’s checked into.

But a deeper dive into that question reveals that the question they’re asking is thicker than simply wondering about his location.

The verb here used for ‘stay’ (*meno*) is the same one that is used in John 15 for abide. The disciples in John 1 ask him where he is staying, where are you abiding, where are you dwelling; to which Jesus simply responds with ‘come and see.’ Come and see.

And I will show you not just where *I* stay and abide, but where *you* must stay and abide.

Because later in chapter 15, Jesus basically says to them, “Stay in me.” Abide in me. After walking with Him for three years, Jesus finally gives them the answer. He says to His disciples that it is not a question or matter of where I am staying. *He* is the constant. *He* is the vine that is planted.

The more important question is are *you* staying in *me*?

And yes, my fellow branches, that is *still* the question even for us today, 2000 years later. Because is it not the case that we still frequently want to ask Jesus the same thing? “Jesus, where are you staying? Where are you abiding? Where are you in this situation? Are you with this person? Are you going to be involved in this or that situation? Where will you be when x-y-z happens?”

“Rabbi, where are you staying?” Where will you be? Where can we find you? Where will you be when we need you?

And I’m wondering more and more if that question is actually a reaction to our deep longing, as human beings, to be assured that we have somewhere that we can call home. A place where we can rest, abide. A place where we are able to belong.

Old Testament scholar, Walter Bruggemann, once said this: “The sense of being lost, displaced, and homeless is pervasive in a contemporary culture. The yearning to belong somewhere, to have a home, to be in a safe place, is a deep and moving pursuit... increasing numbers of persons are disoriented, characterized as possessors of the ‘homeless mind.’”

In other words, we don’t feel at home in our own heads anymore.

And I think what he’s getting at is this deeply human desire—that’s been intentionally planted within us—to want to belong. To be able to rest somewhere. We were not created to exist autonomously. To be anonymous. We were created *for* communion. For being in community—with God and with one another.

In other words, you are wired—it’s in your physical, emotional, and spiritual DNA—to *want* to be in relationship with God and with others. It’s what we were created for. Sin has not stamped out the image of God in us that is inherently communal.

And so it’s something that we should never be ashamed about or embarrassed about—that we want relationship. To find ourselves at home in relationship. Because that Greek word that Jesus uses here in John 15—this word for ‘stay’—*conveys a sense of home and belonging*.

So it forces the question: Where *are you* staying? Right now. Where is your home? That feeling of belonging and safety and recognition and value? Of being in something that is bigger than yourself?

Because Jesus is inviting us to find that sense of belonging in Him. To find our sense of home in Him. He is the answer to our disorientation: when we feel lost, when we feel displaced, when we actually are displaced or separated from our home and we need to find our anchoring in something.

This past week I received an email from Open Doors—a ministry that follows the trends of Christian persecution in the world. And every year in January, they post the top fifty countries where persecution is most aggressive, based on a variety of factors. (North Korea, Somalia, Yemen, Sudan, Eritrea, Syria, Nigeria, Pakistan, Libya, Iran.)

And just reading that list and reviewing some of the rationale for why certain countries were selected, just reminded me of the multitude of Christian brothers and sisters around the world who

have been ripped of their physical homes—their houses, their church buildings, for some of them their family members. Children have been kidnapped, lives have been stolen.

These people *can't* anchor themselves in or find their sense of belonging in their houses or church buildings or even their families, because those things could easily get taken away from them.

My own son Elijah has found his 'safe place,' his home, sitting on my lap. Whenever he needs comfort after having hit his head, or to run away from his overly-aggressive older brother, he'll come find me and plop himself on my lap or between my legs.

It's where he feels safe. And as his mom, I'm happy to be that place for him. But I know—and every parent knows this—that my children do not 'belong' to me. And ultimately I do not want them to 'abide' in *me*.

Because I want them to abide in Christ. I am just a channel for conveying that sense of belonging that hopefully one day points them to the safety and belonging they must find in their Saviour.

And as the community of God, as branches together who are connected to the Vine that is Jesus, is this not also our task for one another? To be channels of that sense of belonging and home that is ultimately found in Christ?

Es Devlin art project in London

- In 2022, had been struck and moved by people welcoming in Ukrainian refugees, but haven't seen the same response to others.
- Had been looking for many years; captivated by a stranded church in London. Sat in it one day and thought, 'What if we make a new congregation?'
- Make fifty paintings and fill the inside of the church.
- Each 'stranger' (immigrant or refugee) contributes to the portrait by giving her their gaze for 45 minutes and telling her their story.
- It was an exploration of what does the word 'home' mean, and who are we? What can we be together?
- These people each bring their gifts – each of the strangers told her what to put inside.
- Dismantle the structures of separation and otherness that lead us to not be supportive of some communities; a living portrait of London's shared humanity.

What a beautiful way of prophetically describing—through art—what the church is called to be.

And in a world that may be making us feel more and more disoriented and lost—because we genuinely don't know what's going to happen next—cultivating this sense of belonging is vitally important for our witness. We cannot be anchored to the world. We cannot feel at home in what we hope this world to be. We cannot abide in our good-and-Godly efforts to make our 'home' here.

Because when we do that, we may hear Jesus' voice flipping the disciples' question back on us and asking us, "Where are you staying? Where are you seeking to find rest and connectedness and belonging? In what are you abiding?"

And because that's the question He asks of us, *the most important thing* that we can do as a spiritual community of branches seeking to be connected to the Vine that is Jesus; *the most important thing that we can do* as a root system that seeks to intertwine our roots together so that we can enable one another to grow; *the most important thing that we can do* is remind one another to abide in Christ.

"*I am the vine,*" He says. "*You are the branches.... If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers....*" Not because the Gardener doesn't like you, but because you refuse to find your life and nourishment in Him.

But, verse 7, "*If you [do] remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*" Why will it be done? Why is that a guarantee? Because if you are dwelling in the Vine, then your wishes are *directly impacted* by your relationship to the Vine. Your wishes are no longer being defined by *your* wants and needs but by a desire to be even more deeply connected with *Him*.

In other words, it is no longer your will alone that defines your desires, but your will transformed by His. And verse 8, the fruit that we then produce is glorifying to the Father and reveals us to be His disciples.

This is how the world will know that we are His disciples. This is our witness. How we abide in His love and find our home in that love, as verse 9 encourages us to do.

It's all connected. Our connectedness to the vine impacts our connectedness to one another, which impacts our sense of home and belonging, which impacts our ability to bear good fruit that brings glory to God, which impacts our own desires and hopes, which impacts our witness as disciples, which ultimately impacts our sense of witness and belonging to and with one another.

It's why, again—as we talked about last week—the focus isn't primarily on the fruit, on our 'good works.' The fruit is the natural byproduct of how we are abiding in the Vine.

And our sense of home, then, is not tied to a particular place or land or country. It can't be. Our sense of home is directly tied to the person of Jesus.

And because of this, as one very wise person said to me this week, "The authentic work of Christ and the work of the church is hard, if not impossible, to do at a distance. Ministry together must prioritize proximity (or nearness) in order to truly see God and one another."

Yes, this means leaning closer into the deep wounds and hurts that we feel. Yes, this means listening to the stories of ‘the other’ and seeing them no longer as strangers. Yes, this means leaning into the sense of loss and disconnectedness and homelessness that we can sometimes experience.

But as one pastor shared with me, “Tragedy really does bring out the best of churches.” And it is the great challenge and privilege of the church—we, as the branches—to provide shelter and a sense of home in times of crisis. That we can integrate and enfold others in their pain and connect them to the life source that is sustaining us.

I’ve said this before, but *this*—here—is where we practice being the people of God and practice the Kingdom come near. *So that* we can then exercise our spiritual muscles *out there* and do radical things that shock the world like love our enemies.

It’s why Jesus says in verse 9: “*As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love.*” Abide, stay, find your home, in my love. Just imagine the impact of a community when we are fixated on remaining in the love of Jesus Christ.

The ‘Church’ has not always been this place for people. We know that. And we grieve that many of the issues in the history of the church have come about because we have credited certain branches—or our own branchiness—as more superior.

We have sought to make our fruit look better than others so that we can show off—as Henri Nouwen once put it—“pious ornaments of a morally respectable existence.”

But the apostle Paul warns the church in Rome not to do exactly this:

“If some of the branches have been broken off, and you, though a wild olive shoot, have been grafted in among the others and now share in the nourishing sap from the olive root, do not consider yourself to be superior to those other branches.... You do not support the root, but the root supports you.”

In other words, your place as a branch in God’s vineyard is solely based on the reality that you were grafted by God’s grace into the Vine that is Jesus. You don’t make glory for Him. You are supported *by* Him. And you *reveal* His glory in how dependent you are on Him.

Our most frequent mistake as branches is to forget this. *He* is the Vine; *we* are the branches.

I don’t want the fruit that I bear to be pious ornaments of a morally respectable existence. I’m not here to be morally respectable. I’m here to be an ambassador of the Vine. To bear a kind of fruit that is indicative of the glory of heaven and the wonder of the Kingdom, fruit that is deeply informed and shaped by a connectedness to Christ and to His communion of saints.

We are part of the global communion of saints that Christ has—and is—grafting in. And by the grace of God, our mistakes do not change the fact that Jesus *still calls us to be the branches*. To be a root system of intertwined messiness and beauty where people sense a connectedness to a home that is not of this world.

Our mistakes and messiness don't change the fact that He still wants His Church to be His branches, His extensions and arms of love and care. And that He loves *us* so much that He wants to let us keep bearing His fruit as His one-and-only witness in this world.

The Church will never be a perfectly pruned fruit factory for Jesus. But He loves us anyway.

And the most important thing we can do for one another is to remind one another—as fellow branches—to stay connected to the Vine.

Abide in the Vine. Dwell in the Vine. Rest in the Vine. Make your home in the Vine.

He is your true home.