

## John: The “I Am” Sayings of Jesus- Part 2 Sunday, 4/3/22

Last week we remembered Jesus making the outrageous claim of “I am,” claiming his identification with the God who spoke to Moses out of the burning bush. We also reviewed the familiar image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd and the not-so-familiar image of Jesus as the Gate. Today we’ll ponder the True Vine and the Bread of Life.

In our earlier reading from John 15, Jesus gave us a complicated metaphor with his “I am the True Vine.” There are four main “characters” in this metaphor: The vine (that’s the roots and the thick trunk in this picture); the branches (the smaller, thinner ends of each vine, including what’s called the “cane” in this diagram, as well as the leaves); the grapes, or more generically, the fruit; and the gardener. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches, the fruit is something we’re expected to produce in our lives, and God (whom Jesus calls his Father) is the gardener. Got that? Everything we need to learn from this metaphor concerns the interrelationships among the vine, the branches, the fruit, and the gardener.

Let’s start with the relationship between the vine and the gardener. Jesus calls himself the “true vine.” That might suggest to you that there have been false vines, sort of like the poison ivy plants of our spiritual heritage. And if you thought that, you’d be right.

In the Old Testament writings, Israel was compared to a vine or a vineyard that God planted through Abraham.<sup>1</sup> Remember, when the Bible talks about Israel, it’s not a prophecy of the modern geopolitical country of Israel, but the descendants of Abraham, through his son Isaac and his son Jacob, who was later given the name of Israel. The original vine, Israel, was a people, the branch of Abraham, who were called to go and bring God’s blessing to all people.

But something went wrong with Israel. With each season of growth, Israel began to take on a shape that was displeasing to God and contrary to the purpose of the plant, which was to produce fruit that glorified God and blessed all people. Instead of becoming a blessing to all people, Israel took on the diseases of the people they encountered, worshipping idols and false gods. Forty years in Egyptian captivity and the giving of new commandments through Moses weren’t enough to save the original vine, and so the Gardner

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<sup>1</sup> See Isaiah 5:1-7, Psalm 80:8-16, Ezekiel 15:1-14, Hosea 10:1, Jeremiah 2:21

uprooted it, destroying Jerusalem and sending Israel off into captivity.

That's the story of most of the Old Testament, the story of how God planted Israel, and then uprooted Israel when it failed to produce fruit. I thank God for that heritage, even the uprooting, because in the place of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, we have a better vine to cling to: Jesus Christ.

If Jesus is the True Vine, the vine that will never be uprooted, the vine that will always bear fruit, then the branches of the vine are the disciples of Jesus. Frequently in the Gospels we hear Jesus trying to reorient the Jews to the reality of the new vine. God's blessing is no longer inherited from Abraham or any other parent. It comes though being a living branch of the True Vine, Jesus.

Three times Jesus tells us in John 15 that we are to remain, abide, or dwell. The sense of the command is that it's to be ongoing, not occasional. Branches aren't attached to a vine on Sunday morning and then detached for the remainder of the week, like a plastic Lego model. Jesus makes us two promises. The first promise is that if we live in vital, intimate relationship with Him, He will live in vital, intimate relationship with us. "Remain in me and I will remain in you."<sup>2</sup> And the second promise is that such a relationship will be productive, with tangible and valuable results. "Those who remain in me, and I in them, will bear much fruit."<sup>3</sup> And just in case we don't know this already, Jesus clarifies that above all else, this relationship and the fruit it bears is characterized by love. The vital nutrients feeding the vine of Israel were ancestry and obedience. The lifeblood of the vine of Jesus is love.

Let's move on to our next "I am" statement. I'm reading from John 6 in the New Revised Standard Version, beginning with verse 30. [{Read John 6:30-35 NRSV}](#)

Many of my favorite memories from childhood involve the kitchen where I spent the first 18 years of my life, sometimes preparing, but much more often being served, the meals that allowed me to grow into a healthy adult. I have one early memory of sitting on the kitchen floor at the feet of my mother with a large aluminum pot with a handle on the top, manually mixing bread dough. Apparently, that was before the advent of the KitchenAid mixer, and it was decades before the bread machine craze that swept our country! I can

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<sup>2</sup> John 15:4, NLT (2<sup>nd</sup> Ed.)

<sup>3</sup> John 15:5, Ibid

remember the smell of the dough, getting myself covered with flour, and how hard I worked to turn that crank. But I also remember the reward when the bread came out of the oven, served steaming hot and covered with butter and honey. When I hear the phrase, “The Bread of Life,” those are some of the senses that get activated in my mind. How about you?

By now you’ve probably spotted a pattern in these “I am” statements of Jesus. Just as his use of the phrase “I am” makes clear his identity as God, his association with common things (gates, shepherds, bread) makes clear his identity as human. Jesus is both fully God and fully human, and every time we read one of these “I am” statements, we’re to be reminded of both.

To say that Jesus had a hard job would be a monumental understatement. On the one hand, he needed to be as concrete and simple as possible, so that both his words and his actions conveyed the Good News that God intended. On the other hand, every time he offered up miracles and concrete analogies, someone in the crowd inevitably mistook him!

That’s exactly what happened in the aftermath of the feeding of the 5,000. Jesus multiplied the loaves and fish to demonstrate to the crowd that he had divine authority to teach and forgive. Just twenty-four hours later, the crowd is back for more bread, either oblivious or uncaring that Jesus didn’t come to give them bread, but to be bread. Can you even begin to imagine how frustrating that must have been?

Sometimes it helps in the understanding of something to consider it’s opposite. So let’s talk about the opposite of being filled with our daily bread. Let’s talk about what it means to be starving.

The human body can sustain life without oxygen for only a matter of minutes and without water for as long as a week. But people have survived for more than two months without food. Starvation begins to happen when there are fewer food calories coming in than there are calories being consumed by the body. The body has a complicated system for preserving itself by breaking down glycogen and converting fat, but this all comes at a cost. A starving person is prone to apathy, listlessness, and even a higher susceptibility to disease, until they eventually die, usually by “cardiac arrhythmia or a heart attack.”<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starvation>

There's a similar process of spiritual starvation that inevitably happens when there's an imbalance between the amount of the Bread of Life consumed and the daily spiritual needs we have. It's possible to live to be greater than 100 years old without praying once, reading a single page of the Bible, or walking into a church building. But this too comes at a cost.

We are more than bags of water and bones. We are spiritual beings, created to be in relationship with God. When we fail to eat our recommended daily allowance of the Bread of Life, Jesus, we begin to feel disoriented, confusing our own desires and preferences with the example and will of Jesus. We begin to experience apathy to the needs of our neighbors. We become more susceptible to the spiritual diseases of sin, until eventually our heart becomes so hard and dark that we die spiritually, oblivious to the voice of the Holy Spirit. That's what spiritual starvation looks like. Thank God there's an alternative for us!

I don't think Jesus had the Communion table in mind primarily when he called himself the Bread of Life, but the Lord's Table certainly does punctuate his teaching well. If Jesus came to be bread instead of giving us bread, nowhere else is that made clearer than in the breaking of the bread in the Eucharist, when we remember and relive the breaking of Christ's body so that we might live as forgiven people. When we eat the communion bread, we're also commissioned, sent by Jesus, into the world to offer our own lives as broken bread for others. And so ultimately, Jesus, the Bread of Life, was broken for us, so that we might be broken for others, offering them eternal life in the name of Jesus.

In just a little while you'll be invited to communion with Jesus, the Bread of Life. When you do so, receive God's forgiveness with glad hearts, but don't forget about God's commission to you as well. We are all sent, and the Bread of Life is our strength and joy for the journey.

Please take some time now to reflect on this question: Do you need to increase your calorie intake of the Bread of Life?



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