

I love the “I am” statements in John’s Gospel, don’t you?

“I am the good Shepherd”—we heard that last week!

“I am the Bread of life”—anybody else here hungry?

“I am the Light of the world”—how illuminating!

“I am the Resurrection and the Life”—when it comes to funerals, that’s a staple.

Then today . . . “I am the Vine; you are the branches.”

Now that’s a nice image, isn’t it? Here’s Jesus, the true Vine, and we’re the branches, connected to Him. His Father’s the Vinedresser; we’re part of His vineyard kingdom. It’s really a nice picture of our relationship with God. But as we continued to read, I began wondering how much I still love this “I am” statement.

I mean, everything was going along swimmingly, just fine, but then Jesus starts saying some pretty crazy things. Things like “Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, [My Father] takes away.” And even, “If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” Maybe after hearing that again, this whole bit about “I am the Vine; you are the branches” just doesn’t have the same ring to it. It’s not as nice and sweet anymore, but is actually starting to sound a little scary.

Just think! If you’re not bearing enough fruit, then God that Vinedresser just might reach out and grab you. You’d be plucked off, tossed aside to wither and dry up, only to be set ablaze in the fire. Not the best thought is it? And we know Jesus doesn’t lie—He’s dead serious—if He says it, odds are it’s gonna happen.

If you feel like I do, then maybe when you look inside, you’re also thinking, *Uh-oh, God wants fruit out of me! How’s that going? Am I producing enough?* And when it comes to bearing fruit, which one of us doesn’t think of the fruits of the Spirit? In his letter to the Galatians, St. Paul gives us a few examples of what that fruit looks like—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. So, how are we doing at those?

Now, I don’t know about you, but if you asked me to describe myself in one word, none of those would come to mind.

Love—well, I really want to . . . but when it comes to some people it’s just so hard, isn’t it?

And joy—some days, yes . . . but some days, no.

Peace—sure, I know peace . . . until something happens.

Patience—I can’t *wait* to get that one!

Kindness—yeah, I can be kind . . . to those who were kind first.

Goodness—I think it’s good to be good . . . but sometimes it feels better to be bad.

Faithfulness—I haven’t quite *committed* to that yet.

Gentleness—that’s one I’ve had to learn the *hard* way.

And with self-control—I’m still trying to get my hands around that.

So, when I hear Jesus’ words today, I’m watching for that Vinedresser’s hands, just waiting to be grabbed and discarded and burned.

A long time ago, someone from my congregation emailed me a very powerful illustration. It goes like this:

A member of the church, who previously had been attending services regularly, stopped going. After a few weeks, the pastor decided to visit him.

It was a chilly evening. The pastor found the man at home alone, sitting before a blazing fire. Guessing the reason for his pastor's visit, the man welcomed him in, and led him to a comfortable chair near the fireplace.

Together, they waited. The pastor made himself at home but said nothing. In the grave silence, he contemplated the dance of the flames around the burning logs. And after some minutes, the pastor took the fire tongs, carefully picked up a brightly burning ember and placed it to one side of the hearth all alone, and then sat back down in his chair—still silent.

The host watched all this in quiet contemplation. As the one lone ember's flame flickered and diminished, there was a momentary glow, but then the fire was no more. Soon it was cold and dead.

Not a word had been spoken since the initial greeting. But the pastor glanced at his watch and got up to leave. Slowing standing, he picked up the cold, dead ember and placed it back in the middle of the fire. Immediately, it began to glow again, once more filled with the light and the warmth of the burning coals around it.

When the pastor was nearly out the door, the man said to him with a tear running down his cheek, "Thank you so much for your visit today. And especially for the fiery sermon. I'll be back in church next Sunday."

Is that's what's going on with us? Like that ember, separated from the light and warmth of the burning coals—have we grown cold and dead? Is that why when we look at ourselves, investigate our lives, we're not finding much fruit? Likely not—after all, you and I are here today. We are in God's house, His dwelling place, where His glory is pleased to dwell. And close to Him, the Light of the world shines on us, and our hearts burn within us with the fire of His love. We are anything but far from the source of all light and warmth.

It's only when we're distanced from Him that we burn out and die. When we don't come to church, when we skip Bible Study and Sunday School, when we neglect His Word at home, when we push Him out of our lives with unrepentant sin—that's when we can lose the light of life. But that's not us—you I are here. I know many of you faithfully read your Bible and stay close to this place. And so surely you abide in Him, and His Word abides in you.

Knowing Jesus' hearers though, I wonder if they're as concerned as we are. I mean, when first-century Jewish ears hear Jesus talking about producing fruit, chances are good they see something different from us when they go to inspect their harvest. Instead of seeing a famine the way we do, there's a good chance they see an abundance. For us, we're used to hearing how we're all a buncha hopeless sinners, and there's not a thing we can do about it. We've been hearing it all our lives, and it's difficult to imagine otherwise. But for these folks living two thousand years ago, all this "Without Me you can do nothing" stuff is all brand new. No, they saw how they hadn't murdered anybody, hadn't cheated on their spouse, don't remember a time when they stole from the marketplace, and they said, *Okay, there's some fruit.* And they saw how they'd celebrated the required feasts, offered the necessary sacrifices, even gave up their foreskin, and they said, *Yup, there's plenty more.* In their eyes, there was no shortage of fruits. But like Jesus points out, unless they abide in Him none of that fruit is any good—it's not about *doing* but about *being*, it's about having a relationship with Him.

So, if you and I look around and don't see the fruits in our lives, we're actually in a good place. We're right where we need to be. Because what does it do? It drives you even closer to Him, doesn't it? It makes you want to abide in Him all the more, pushes you to see Him as your only source of life. And that brings you to a church like this.

Here, you are abiding in Jesus, the Vine. The Vine who was wrapped around the tree of the cross, who has shed His life-blood for your sake. Like life-giving sap, His blood flows out of Him and now into you. It floods your ears, splashes upon your forehead, and fills your mouth. We are His branches, connected and fed, nourished and strong. We abide in Him, and He abides in us. And joined to Him, we can't help but bear fruit.

But the question still remains—why don't we see it? If we're connected to the Vine, how come this fruit's so hard to find? Well, the simplest answer is that we're still sinners—forgiven sinners, but sinners nonetheless—and it's through flawed, imperfect people that Christ gets the job done. So what might be God-pleasing fruit actually looks like junk to us,

because it's coming from imperfect people. But here's another answer. Using the same analogy, do branches have eyes to see the fruits they produce? Are they even aware when there's a harvest? Only the Vinedresser is able to tell, only He has eyes to see Christ's life flowing inside of you and spilling out of you. After all, these are spiritual things—not something we can physically see with our eyeballs. But even if we could, we wouldn't think this fruit was ours anyway. It's the Vine alive in us, working through us—so when it comes to fruit, we have a tough time seeing our names on any of it. Without the Vine we could do nothing, but abiding in us He does everything.

This reminds me of a touching story I heard last October. Tiny 10-month-old Mason's life hung in the balance. He had a serious heart condition, and for a little while it sure looked bleak. If he didn't get a heart transplant, he wouldn't be able to laugh, or play, or even grow up. No, without a new heart, Mason wouldn't be doing much of anything.

Shortly, his family's prayers were answered, however. Just a year earlier, Alaiya, was a little girl when she died a tragic death due to bacterial meningitis. But her parents knew organ donation was the path they wanted for their child. Here's how her mother Lacey put it, "Alaiya was such a giving child that we knew it was the right thing to do. . . . We knew that she would be saving others' lives." And that's just what she did.

Late September, Lacey got a chance to hear her daughter's heart beating in little Mason's chest. "Seeing Mason for the first time," she said, "we instantly felt a connection." "We are so glad Mason is doing well. . . . We definitely saw Alaiya in him".

If God the Father were to put His head up to your chest, what He would hear wouldn't be what you'd expect. You see, the heart that beats inside of you isn't quite yours either, but is the very heart of God's Son. What now pumps inside of you is the same one out of which poured blood and water on the cross. To every inch of you it carries His love, His joy, His peace, His patience, His kindness, His goodness, His faithfulness, His gentleness, and His self-control. Like Alaiya, Jesus died a tragic death, giving His life, to save yours. And now, you abide in Him, and He in you.

And one day, when God finally meets you face-to-face on the other side, He will hear in you the very heartbeat of His Son. Like Alaiyah's parents He'll later say, "Seeing them for the first time, we instantly felt a connection. I'm so glad they—Greg . . . Caitlin . . . Henry . . . Judy—I'm so glad they are doing well. I definitely saw Jesus in them."