



*Holy God, we praise You for the Life  
we discover in Your holy Word.  
Nurture our understanding, that we  
may grow in love of You.*

*May the words of my mouth and the  
meditations of our hearts be always  
acceptable in Your sight, O Lord, our  
Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.*

“I am the vine,” Jesus says; “you are the branches.”

“I am the vine; you are the branches.”

This stunning metaphor has fired the imagination of theologians, musicians, and artists for two thousand years. In the Church of St. Castor<sup>1</sup> in Karden, Germany, a 17<sup>th</sup>-century oil painting of the crucified Christ portrays the cross as a blossoming

tree tended by God the Father and watered by Mary the mother of Jesus; the twelve apostles appear as radiant fruit on branches curling out from the main beam of the cross. A stained-glass window made in 1881 for a church in Northern Ireland<sup>2</sup> shows a gorgeous vine bursting with pink, white, light blue, teal, red, dark green, and yellow blossoms. Its branches and tendrils twine across the six lancets of the enormous window, seeming to press against the borders of the glass. Red and purple fruits are nestled among the blossoms—each fruit small and particular, yet each one adding to the life-giving energy of the vine. The vine grows upward from a border across the bottom of the window made of two interwoven strands, like the infinity symbol, in subtly changing colors—pale green, pale yellow, orange—suggesting dynamic movement and irrepressible life surging through the eternal Vine that is Christ.

“I am the vine,” our Savior says; “you are the branches.” What joy to ponder this botanical metaphor during Earth Month, when we listen to the wisdom of this planet with its marvelous creatures and biomes and Earth-honoring traditions! We can be energized for discipleship as we ponder the blossoming vine that is Christ, giving ourselves to the fruitfulness of coming to know Christ more deeply on the spiritual adventure to which the Gospel of John beckons us.

Yes, that’s right: “spiritual adventure”! The Fourth Gospel invites us on a journey of dramatic spiritual significance for each believer and cosmic consequences for the healing of this world. Like the Camino of Santiago de Compostela and other

pilgrimage routes, this journey unfolds in stages. Jesus as the True Vine is the final “I Am” saying in a series of seven “I Am” sayings in the Gospel of John that train us to know who Jesus is and who we are to be, as his disciples. Jesus says:

- “I am the Bread of Life”
- “I am the Light of the World”
- “I am the Gate for the sheep”
- “I am the Good Shepherd”
- “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” which Jesus says as he prepares to raise Lazarus from the dead
- “I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life,” and finally, in the seventh and climactic position in the series, Jesus tells his disciples,
- “I am the True Vine.... I am the Vine, you are the branches.”

These seven “I Am” sayings perform powerful witness in the Gospel of John. They establish John’s theology that Jesus is not only a prophetic messenger sent by God, he *is* God: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.” see John 1:1–5 The “I Am” sayings elaborate on this theology by recalling the story of Moses at the burning bush. Moses is watching over sheep in the desert when he sees a bush blazing with flames yet not being consumed. The bush is alight with holy fire! Moses draws near and hears the voice of God giving him a commission to lead his people out of slavery in Egypt, a tradition foundational to the biblical understanding of God as a mighty God of liberation! Moses, overcome with awe, asks God’s Name, and the divine Voice responds,

“I AM who I AM.” A beautiful mystery—the incandescent truth of God spoken by the Holy One of Being!

“I AM who I AM.” The very Name of God, spoken from the heart of a bush ablaze with divine glory! And now, in these latter days,<sup>3</sup> the Gospel of John has Jesus, the Incarnate Word, say “I AM,” not just once but seven times. Jesus Christ is the Divine Word incarnate, the Holy One of Being who speaks in glorious mystery to all who hear his voice!<sup>4</sup>

That’s the first thing John teaches us through these “I Am” sayings: Jesus and the Father are one. <sup>10:30–38</sup> Here’s a second point: the seven “I Am” sayings are stages of a journey of spiritual formation for all who seek Jesus and believe in Him. The more you read the Gospel of John, the more you experience the “I Am” sayings forming you to abide in Christ just as branches abide in their vine. These sayings teach us how to be disciples.

Jesus is the Bread of Life! <sup>6:35, 48</sup> If we abide in his love, we can nourish all who are hungry—those who need actual food and those starved for connection; those who hunger for meaning, and those who need to be persuaded that the Creator of the cosmos loves them! If that sounds like a tall order, remember: we’re just the branches—the Vine is JESUS. It’s his power and his promise: “Ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you!” <sup>15:7</sup>

Jesus is the Light of the World! <sup>8:12; 9:5</sup> If we abide in his love, we can pour ourselves into whatever will light up the darkness: music-making, art-making, peacemaking; courageous protest and dissent wherever ideological hatred and violence threaten to obliterate persons, communities, or cultures.

Jesus is the Gate for the sheep<sup>10:7, 9</sup> the Good Shepherd! <sup>10:11, 14</sup> If we abide in his love, here at St. Thomas's we'll draw as many as we can into belonging—especially those convinced that the Church has forgotten them. We'll guard the well-being of those who are vulnerable in our communities, including the countless species whose habitats and very existence are at risk as the climate crisis intensifies.

Jesus is Resurrection and Life! <sup>11:25</sup> This cosmic Christ whom we worship is the Way, the Truth, and the Life! <sup>14:6</sup> If we abide in the way of love, the truth of love, and the living power of love, we can work tirelessly for healing and renewal even in landscapes of despair and hopelessness, knowing that absolutely nothing is beyond the reach of Christ's compassion.

Jesus is the True Vine! <sup>15:1</sup> Here it is: the final stage in our spiritual formation journey through the Gospel of John. Jesus is the vine and we are the branches.<sup>5</sup> In the background of this beautiful image is Psalm 80, where Israel is a flourishing vine planted by God, its branches and tendrils spreading from the Mediterranean Sea to the river Euphrates. In Psalm 80, the magnificent foliage and fruit of Israel cover the known world, in keeping with the call of Abraham<sup>6</sup> to be a blessing for all the families of the earth. Proliferation in fruitful abundance: that's what vines do! Some vines spread by twining around things, using curling tendrils to attach to

something, then adjusting the tension to pull the vine upward. Others use clinging roots or adhesive surfaces to grab onto things and pull themselves sideways or upward. Vines live by holding things close as they grow irrepressibly toward new horizons.

So how do we become fruitful branches of the vine that is Christ?

What is it, Gospel of John, that we have to hold close?

Toward what should we be growing?

These are not rhetorical questions. There's an answer, in John: love!

The Johannine traditions are all about love. "For God so loved the world that [God] gave [God's] only Son, that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life" (John 3:16). "I give you a new commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another.... By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (John 13). "God is Love" and also, "perfect love casts out fear" (First John 4).

Christ the True Vine is training us to grow toward LOVE!

Our fruitfulness will proliferate wildly when we root ourselves in Christ and reach for LOVE in everything we do. Each fruit may be small and particular, but each adds to the life-giving energy of the vine. I know an academic adviser at a state university who had an undergrad advisee struggling with performance anxiety, a young woman with excellent grades who didn't believe in herself. Over four years, the adviser supported her in every meeting with affirmation and encouragement.

The student is graduating next week, and on Friday she told the adviser her support hadn't just helped a little, it had made a tremendous difference throughout her college years. Every micro gesture of love, no matter how small, can change the terrain, can teach someone they are seen and precious and loved.

In this season of your life: abide in Christ's love, and see what fruit springs forth!

In this season at St. Thomas's: abide in Christ's love, and the fruitfulness of this congregation will proliferate wildly!<sup>7</sup>

That's a promise straight from the Source of Light and Life, the One who is all compassion: Jesus Christ, to whom be all honor, glory, and praise, now and forever.

Amen.

The Rev. Dr. Carolyn J. Sharp

28 April 2024

Easter 5B

Acts 8:26–40; Psalm 22:24–30; 1 John 4:7–21; John 15:1–8

Preached at St. Thomas's Episcopal Church, New Haven, Connecticut

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<sup>1</sup> See the history of the Stiftskirche St. Castor [here](#).

<sup>2</sup> See an image of the stained glass at St. Patrick's Church in Ballymena [here](#); the window was made by Heaton, Butler & Bayne of London. This Church of Ireland church, a member of the Anglican Communion in the Diocese of Connor, was consecrated in 1855 and rebuilt twice, including reopening in 1881 with this stained glass. The church is located on Castle Street in Ballymena.

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<sup>3</sup> Hebrews 1:2.

<sup>4</sup> On Jesus as the Good Shepherd of the entire cosmos and all living beings as those who hear his voice, see my Earth Day sermon for St. Mark's Episcopal Church in New Canaan, Connecticut, [John 10 on 21 April 2024](#).

<sup>5</sup> Many commentators have heard resonances of earlier biblical texts here. As biblical intertexts for Jesus as the true vine in John 15, commentators cite these passages: prophetic oracles of judgment, including Isa 5:1–7, an oracle indicting Israel and Judah for economic violence and exploitation; Jer 2:21 on Israel as the vine God had planted that turned “degenerate” and “wild”(NRSV) or “base and alien” (NJPS); 8:13; Ezek 15:1–8, against the sinful inhabitations of Jerusalem; Ezek 17:5–10; 19:10–14; Hos 10:1–2, an indictment of the northern kingdom of Israel for idolatry. I am unpersuaded by arguments that John is alluding to the polemic in such passages as a way to underscore that Jesus has displaced Israel as the “true” Israel of God. Far more relevant are Hebrew Bible passages celebrating Israel's beauty and fruitfulness, such as Hos 14:6–8 and Psalm 80. While the latter passage laments the destruction of the vine (Israel) by the Neo-Assyrian empire, it does not blame the covenant people for the calamity that has befallen them.

<sup>6</sup> For the LORD's calling of Abram, later renamed Abraham, see Gen 12:1–3.

<sup>7</sup> Marianne Meye Thompson writes, “Strikingly, Jesus does not exhort his disciples to bear fruit; rather, he exhorts his disciples to remain attached to him, the source of life.... [Abiding in him] entails an openness and responsiveness to Jesus' life-giving presence.... As part of John's rich vocabulary for the varied aspects of discipleship—believing, following, and knowing—‘abiding’ implies perseverance, steadfastness, or faithfulness. In John, the life of discipleship does not merely begin with receptivity to Jesus; such receptivity characterizes the entire life of the disciple from beginning to end” (*John: A Commentary*, New Testament Library [Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2015], 325).