

Easter 5B – May 10, 2009

Abiding Peace Lutheran Church – Budd Lake, NJ

Acts 8:26-40

Psalm 22:25-31

I John 4:7-21

John 15:1-8

Last week we took a look at one of Jesus' famous "I am" statements: "I am the good shepherd." This week's text is another of those "I am" statements: "I am the true vine."

Before we dig deeper into the text for this week, however, it would serve us to look further at what these "I am" statements are. Simply put, they are Jesus defining his relationship to God.

For our Gospel writer John, "I am" is the name of God. This comes straight from the Old Testament book of Exodus. Remember when Moses met God in the burning bush? Moses said, "If I come to the Israelites and say, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" And God said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'"¹ This is the name of God: I AM. And so it is for our Gospel writer John.

But Jesus goes further – beyond identifying his relationship with God by saying "I AM," he spins metaphors which define our relationship to him, and thereby also to God. In today's reading he first identifies himself as the vine, God is the vinegrower, and we are the branches of the vine.

And just like in last week's lesson, in Jesus' metaphor for himself he defines himself over against those who would be false prophets. Last week he told us that he is the "good shepherd," not to be confused with the hired hands who run away when wolves approach. Today Jesus tells us he is the *true* vine, so that we may not be confused by others who claim to have a relationship with the vinegrower that is, in fact, false.

What follows – Jesus' words to us as the branches – can then come to us as either law or Gospel. Jesus tells us that, "Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned." These are words of Law, words of condemnation, words which have the potential to help us recognize our sin and repent.

But his words can also be Good News for those us branches who are abiding in him, as we are told that we will bear much fruit. But even so, we're told that, "Every branch that bears fruit God prunes to make it bear more fruit." None of us like to think of our lives ever being pruned! We get comfortable where we're at, with what we're doing, when God comes along to do some much-needed pruning, to give us a kick in our complacency, so that in the end our lives may bear more fruit. The process is rarely enjoyable, but it's necessary in order to better make us into the fruit-bearers that God intends us to be.

Perhaps we Americans have become too complacent in our prosperity? Maybe we've become so unaccustomed to suffering, true suffering, that any setbacks seem to us as punishment from God, rather than simply the pruning that the Christian life needs? Pruning to shed the excess, unnecessary stuff to better reveal what's really important in our lives?

Christian author Philip Yancey relates the following story:

In my visits to churches overseas, one difference from North American Christians stands out sharply: their view of hardship and suffering. We who live in an age of unprecedented comfort seem obsessed with the problem of pain. Skeptics mention it as a major roadblock to faith, and believers struggle to come to terms with it. Prayer meetings in the U.S. often focus on illnesses and requests for healing. Not so elsewhere.

I asked a man who visits unregistered house churches in China whether Christians there pray for a change in harsh government policies. After thinking for a moment, he replied that not once had he heard a Chinese Christian pray for relief.

"They assume they'll face opposition," he said. "They can't imagine anything else." He then gave some examples. One pastor had served a term of 27 years at hard labor for holding unauthorized church meetings. When he emerged from prison and returned to church, he thanked the congregation for praying. Assigned a dangerous prison job, he had managed to couple together 1 million railroad cars without an injury. "God answered your prayers for my safety!" he proudly announced. Another imprisoned pastor heard that his wife was going blind. Desperate to rejoin her, he informed the warden that he was renouncing his faith. He was released, but soon felt so guilty that he turned himself in again to the police. He spent the next 30 years in prison.

I found the same pattern in Myanmar (formerly Burma), a dictatorship with brutal policies against religious activities. The person who invited me to the country informed me, "When you speak to pastors, you should remember that probably all of them have spent time in jail because of their faith."

"Then should I talk about one of my book topics like *Where Is God When It Hurts? Or Disappointment with God?*" I asked.

"Oh, no, that's not really a concern here," he said. "We assume we'll be persecuted for faith."²

While I doubt that any of us have been truly persecuted for our faith, at least in the way that Christians in China and Myanmar are persecuted, I still wonder if we are capable of embracing hardship and suffering in the same ways that our brothers and sisters in Christ in those countries do.

Take, for instance, another verse from today's text: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you." Verses such as these have been spun into a distorted lie by many preachers in this country, something popularly referred to as "prosperity gospel."

Prosperity theology is a religious teaching that God desires material prosperity for those he favors. Material prosperity in this theology not only includes financial prosperity but success in relationships and good health as well. This material favour may be preordained, or granted by God in return for correct "faith" significantly evidenced in the beliefs, attitude and obedience of the adherent.³

In the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, prosperity gospel is just another form of cheap grace. Prosperity gospel doesn't require Jesus dying on the cross to forgive our sins.

One author put it this way:

A prosperity gospel can't help itself, it can't avoid building up the wrong things. In it:

- *getting* takes the place of *giving*,
- *guarantees* takes the place of *possibilities* and dreams,
- *'I'* takes the place of *'we'*,
- *command* takes the place of obedience, service, and duty,
- *being served* takes the place of *serving*,
- *self-indulgence* takes the place of discipline and self-control.

In a prosperity gospel, **I** am what it's all about: my needs, my wants, my wealth, my success. I, me, mine. The only 'blame' I have is not from my behavior, but from the act of not withdrawing from the unlimited bank account that God has given me. Push the Gimme Button and expect it to come.⁴

Prosperity gospel is all about avoiding pain and suffering. It's not about what God has already done for us; it's about asking God what more God can do for me, here and now, to prosper me in this life.

This is where prosperity gospel breaks down: When the going gets tough, prosperity gospel has no response other than to say that this must be God's punishment for your misdeeds. Bull! Sometimes things just happen. God doesn't cause bad things to happen to people; *people* cause bad things to happen to people, through the misuse and abuse of our own free will.

But let's get back to the verse at question: "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."

Misinterpreting verses such as this one requires a misreading of the text. In this case, the misinterpretation is quite clear to anyone who actually bothers to study the text in any depth at all. For in this text, Jesus is no longer speaking to us branches in the singular "you" – he's speaking to *all* of us branches. Perhaps it would be easier for us to understand if I re-read it to you using a Southern dialect:

If y'all abide in me, and my words abide in y'all,

ask for whatever y'all wish, and it will be done for y'all.

This is the crux of today's text, literally the cross on which Jesus lies for all of us gathered here today. When we branches abide in the true vine – Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for our salvation – and we bear the fruit that comes as a natural consequences of that relationship, then we may have the trust and assurance that whatever we ask – all of us "we," collectively, as the body of Christ – will be done.

Such a promise comes, however, with great responsibility. Those of us who abide in Christ should already know the sorts of things for which we should be asking. The answer lies in the last verse of today's reading: We should ask for those things which glorify God, and glorify God by bearing fruit.

Amen.

[1,581 words]

¹ Exodus 3:13-14

² "It's Hard to Be Like Jesus: Why would anyone choose to follow a God who promises more hardship, not less?" by Philip Yancey. Downloaded at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/tc/2005/mayjun/1.42.html> on 5/9/09.

³ "Prosperity Theology" from Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia. Downloaded at http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prosperity_theology on 5/9/09.

⁴ "The Prosperity Gospel: Who Gains, and Who Loses" by Robert Longman, Jr. Downloaded at <http://www.spirithome.com/prosperity.html> on 5/9/09.