

## *I Am the True Vine*

John 15:1-11

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I heard an interesting newsclip recently. A research study shows that middle-class Americans are only half as healthy as their British counterparts. We're not faring nearly as well in key areas such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease. Researchers were genuinely surprised by these findings. And they were at a loss on how to account for them, especially since we spend more on health care. One early theory: Americans work quite a few more hours per week than people in Great Britain. Perhaps the added stress is showing up at the doctor's office.

So, time for a quick survey: how many of you feel like you're working too much these days? Let's broaden the question: how many of you feel overextended in your life, with too many responsibilities to handle? Finally, have you ever reached a point where you worried that your busyness might affect your health and well-being?

When I was at Holden Village a few years back—practicing sabbath rest, no less—one of the speakers made a comment that has stuck with me ever since. “We are massively overcommitted,” he said. He went on to describe various ways this shows up: eating on the run, not sleeping well at night, rushing ourselves or our children from one event to another. These things often lead to shot tempers, too much time in the car, and trouble keeping track of important details. Underlying all of this is a nagging sense that life is way too busy, and we don't know how to fix it.

Got any ideas? One popular remedy is to get away from it all: Florida, Mexico, a European or Caribbean cruise. Another is to pull back in the summertime: head to the cabin, do some gardening, go to the swimming pool, hit the golf course. These kinds of diversions are great. They provide a wonderful change of pace. But the help is often short-lived, isn't it? Sometimes we're almost as tired when we return as when we left. Hmm, maybe our problems go deeper than can be fixed by a round of golf or a weekend getaway.

In John 15, Jesus mentions an alternative way of dealing with what ails us. It comes in the form of two simple suggestions. The first suggestion: “**Abide in me**. I am the true vine. You are the branches,” says Jesus, “You need to get

nourishment from me.” Jesus might as well have added “Nothing wrong with fishing or gardening or a trip to the cabin, but if your life doesn’t include me, these things might not be as life-giving as you hope.”

The word for “abide” in Greek is *meno*. It shows up 42 times in the Gospel of John, almost always on the lips of Jesus. That tells me it’s important. It gets translated in a variety of ways: “abide,” “remain,” “continue,” “stay,” “endure”—all of these urging us to stay on track. “Want to get a handle on your crazy lives?” Jesus is asking, “Start by spending some of your valuable time with me.”

To illustrate, Jesus points to a vine. Lots of people in the 1<sup>st</sup> century would have had a vine or two growing in their gardens. If they wanted to produce good fruit, they had to tend to them. They needed to cut away dead wood in the winter and to remove unproductive growth in the summer. As they did, the branches would get nourished by the vine, and would end up healthier and stronger.

Friends, how can we abide in Jesus? By tending to our life with him. And there are any number of ways to do this. A few years ago at Zumbro, during Lent, we read a book by Gary Thomas called *Sacred Pathways*. The book invited us to consider that it’s not one-size-fits-all when it comes to tending to our soul’s pathway to God.

As we began the Lenten series, everybody took a survey. We ended up naming one or two or three life-giving pathways for us. Pathways such as: *Loving God Outdoors; Loving God in solitude and simplicity; Loving God through weekly worship; Loving God by fighting for a cause that’s important to you; Loving God by listening to inspiring music; Loving God by reading a really good book*, and so on. In short, we “abide” in the vine by doing those things that truly feed our souls.

For me personally, one of my best “abiding” times happens when I go hiking. My e-mail is off. The phone isn’t ringing. My brain is clear. I feel alive. I regularly carry on a conversation with God, hopefully not so loud that passersby think they better steer clear. I had a hike recently at Nerstrand Big Woods State Park. It was just what I needed to recharge my batteries.

How about you? How do you feed your soul? Jesus wants you to spend time with him, so he can nourish you. It’s life-giving. Neglect it, he warns, and your

life will wither. Tend to it, and you will have a joy and peace that nothing else can give.

A second suggestion from Jesus. ***Abide in love for one another.*** The life Jesus offers is not just about Jesus and you. It's about Jesus and you and the people around you. Jesus wants us to share that love with each other regularly.

How important is this? Back in John's day, it was crucial. I mentioned a few weeks ago that John's Gospel was probably written near the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century. One of the main reasons for writing it was because Jewish religious leaders had expelled Christians from the synagogue. These Christians, you see, were *Jewish* Christians. For years they'd been keeping one foot in the synagogue and the other in their house churches. Now Jewish leaders were saying: "Enough! Get out!" And for good measure they added, "A curse on anyone who believes that Jesus is the Messiah!"

It was a tough time to be a Christian. They were ostracized from the synagogue where they'd worshipped most all of their lives. Families were split. Jobs were lost. The early believers needed to "abide" in each other, to hang on for dear life in a great big, hostile world.

Is it really all that different today? Spend some time talking to people - after worship, over a cup of coffee in a coffee shop, with a neighbor down the street. Really listen to what they're saying, and not saying. You'll find that many are discouraged and lonely, worried and afraid, sad and angry. Some are wondering how they're going to get through the next week. In short, you'll likely find folks that aren't so different from you and me. And you'll find they need *you* every bit as much as those early Christians needed each other. They need *you* to abide in Jesus' love and show them you care.

The love Jesus is talking about is less a feeling and more an action. It happens as people take a meal to a household in which someone is sick; as Good Shepherd's care ministers visit the homebound; as you pray for a friend during a tough time and then remember later to ask them about it; as you deliver gifts of food to the Wells Food Shelf; as you attend the Palm Sunday brunch and support our youth who are going to New Orleans this summer. "Abide in love for each" Jesus is telling us, "There is any number of things you can be moved to do, if you open your eyes and listen with your heart. This is my commandment," Jesus says, "that you love one another as I have loved you."

My friends, if you're looking for a little less craziness in your life—and before you start planning your next get-away—why not try *abiding in Jesus*. He loves you more than you know. He wants to nourish your life and make it whole. And while you're at it, try *abiding in love with those around you*. Use an encounter every day as an opportunity to love someone. Hopefully these opportunities will provide a pathway to God. And you will fill up your life with a joy and peace unlike any other. Amen.