

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

Chapter 15 of John's Gospel introduces a new and substantial variation on the "I am" metaphor in extending the image to the vine and its branches that bear fruit. All of the "I am" metaphors share in the divine self-designation (*"I am who I am"*), which was God's way of referring to himself in Exodus 3: 14. God had appeared to Moses in the burning bush, and Moses, fearing that the people would not believe that God had sent him, asked by what name God wished to be known. So, God replied, *"I am who I am."* This designation distinguished Yahweh from all of the other foreign gods people might have known. This God was not limited to a first name or a particular domain. This God was not created by human hands nor named by human language. The statement "I am" comes from the Hebrew verb "to be or to exist." With this statement, the God of Israel declared that he was self-existent, eternal, self-sufficient, self-directed, and unchanging. And John took up this image of God in his Gospel account of the life of Jesus. This name for God was considered so holy that it could not be spoken aloud or even written in its entirety. Yahweh as "I AM" always evokes the memory of the events recorded in Exodus of this faithful, wonder-working God being present with his people and showing his power on their behalf.

John took up this holiest of ways of referring to God in his prologue to the Fourth Gospel and in the self-identification of Jesus in John 8:58 when he said "Truly, truly, I say to you, *before Abraham was, I am.*" Depending on who was hearing this declaration, it either evoked an outpouring of faith or a suspicion of blasphemy. In chapter 15, John extends this crucial view of God to his series of "I am" statements because they would have been recognized instantly by a crowd of faithful Jews as being directly associate with the name of God himself. And, after all, that is the overall point of John's narrative --- to demonstrate that Jesus is the unique Son of the Most High, the genuine Messiah. And that is why the concept of abiding in Jesus is so critical to John's gospel. It carries on the message that the expectation of Jesus is that his true disciples will *remain in him* even after his departure. They will *abide, believe and love* in ways that recall the idea of carrying on the essence of who Jesus ultimately was and what he taught.

Throughout the entirety of the *Farewell Discourse* (which is how we refer to this part of the gospel -- or the "high-priestly prayer") Jesus is "openly revealing his own divine nature, his origination from God, and his unique relationship with God the Father." Thus, he is affirming what the narrator told the reader in the Prologue --- "that Jesus is the unique Son of God, participating in the actual nature of God." You will see how he does this if you examine the following words: "I am in the Father and the Father in me" or "the Word was with God, and the Word was God" or "I do not belong to the world" or "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him." So, the final discourse brings us back to the

beginning point of the Gospel, serving to remind us of who Jesus truly is. In doing so, it provides “the framework for the ultimate irony: the death of the life giver who by dying gives life.”

This final discourse “has a more intimate feel than the Sermon on the Mount, “since the death of Jesus is felt impending throughout.” Raymond Brown, the leading authority on this gospel, tells us that Jesus here “is really speaking from heaven; although those who hear him are his disciples, his words are directed to Christians of all times... (and are) meant to be read after he has left the earth.” In this final speech, we find Jesus emphasizing unity among believers. The example for that unity is the relationship that Jesus has with God --- they are one, so also believers should be one.” The other emphasis is upon belief itself. The author tells us from the start that John the Baptist’s purpose was “to testify in order that all might believe in Jesus.” Belief, for John and his community, “will result in life, disbelief in death.” Abiding in Jesus is integrally related to the love Jesus taught his followers to emulate.

Even though it is “dependent on Old Testament images of God’s people as God’s vineyard,” that image is developed here by the author of the Fourth Gospel in new directions, and the metaphor of the vine and its branches is a rich one. It poses challenges for the followers of Jesus: how to live as branches of Christ the vine. The image of community that emerges here “is one of interrelationship, mutuality, and indwelling.” To understand what Jesus means by this it is helpful to visualize what the branches of a vine actually look like: “in a vine, branches are almost completely indistinguishable from one another; it is impossible to determine where one branch stops and another starts...all run together.” This means that “there are no free-standing individuals in the community but branches who encircle one another completely.” What matters is that each individual “is rooted in Jesus and hence gives up individual status to become one of many encircling branches.” This is not the outcome for church communities in the modern world with its emphasis on individual freedom of expression.

The metaphor also suggests “a radically non-hierarchical model for the church.” God alone is the gardener. He alone prunes the branches to foster growth. And the need for pruning should be obvious to any casual gardener: “vines need to focus their energy on producing good quality grapes, rather than lots of second-rate ones...(and) need to grow toward the light rather than getting in a tangled mass.” For the Fourth Gospel, “there is only one measure of one’s place in the faith community...to love as Jesus has loved---and all, great and small, ordained or lay, young and old, male and female are equally accountable to that one standard.” This radical egalitarianism is also far from widespread in most Christian congregations today. The other feature of the metaphor is “anonymity.” This “undercuts any celebration of individual gifts” and thus challenges the contemporary church’s understanding of personality, individualism, and self-expression. Individual distinctiveness must “give way to the common embodiment of love.”

In the promise of an abiding presence, “God’s Easter people find not some abstract speculation about a distant or imaginary Trinity, but an invitation to experience the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit as a saving and liberating presence in the midst of our day-to-day world.” In John’s gospel we find a very distinctive eschatology that “understands life and salvation not as some distant or ‘heavenly’ hope, but as the promise of an abundant life here and now...through the Spirit of the resurrected and living Lord.” And at the forefront, the image of the vine and its branches suggests “profound dependence (and) profound reliance. Because life is nothing without belonging, without intimacy, without relationship.”

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

Sources:

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