Text: John 15:1-8

**Introduction**

Last week was also one of the “I AM” sayings that John records. Last week was “I am the good shepherd.” This week is “I am the vine.”

We mentioned that John records seven of these. We talked a little about how they usually get repeated at least once. And that is the case today. And in that sense they are somewhat circular. One leads to the other layering on top and meandering around until returning to the main thought.

But the main thing about all of these “I AM” statements is that they are personal revelation of God. They are all God telling humans, telling us, who He is. The revelation of God in the Old Testament, and to be honest most of God’s self-revelation was always hidden or at one remove. Behind pillars of fire and cloud. In mystic Shekinah of the Holy of Holies glimpsed once a year. Through the Angel of the LORD and burning bushes or still small voices. And those were often theophanies in action. God would do something – like the plagues, or the fire from Heaven for Elijah, or sending into Exile. And maybe through a prophet God would explain a bit of his action. But at least in my reading rarely did God reveal his ways. His ways are not our ways, and his thoughts are not our thoughts. And the secret things of God remain his forever.

And yet in Jesus we have the full revelation. And in Jesus were have these “I AM” statements. God attempting to reveal himself.

**Text – 1st Vine**

It is one of the constant early questions of the spiritual life – why is there suffering? Our thoughts can often run in this logic. If God loves us, and if God is omnipotent, therefore we should be delivered from all suffering. All of the spiritual traditions of the world have to have some answer for that. The Buddha’s answer was you suffer because you want. The biggest want of course was to go on existing. End your desire and your suffering would stop. The stoic’s answer was simply this is the world. God – the unmoved mover - doesn’t really care about you. And any smaller god isn’t omnipotent and is just out for his or her own designs. Observe the Olympians.

Christianity has its own stable of answers. The first one would be the reality of sin. The world as we experience it with all its suffering is a world of sin, a world groaning in its rebellion and wearing out. The Powers that Be antagonistic to their creator. The second, which Jesus himself would point at elsewhere, would be that God did not spare himself this. If the world treated Jesus this way and crucified him, how could anyone expect anything less?

But those I think might be closer to the cry of dereliction. They are seeds of meditation around senseless suffering. But not all suffering or hardship gets labeled senseless. There are stock phrases like “what doesn’t kill me makes me stronger” or “iron sharpens iron”. There are the natural experiences of mastering anything worth doing. Learning to play an instrument is a struggle. If you garden you deadhead flowers that more might grow. And a plant might put out three branches, two of which probably have to be cut for it to grow properly. The way of life is often the path through if not suffering, then struggle.

And I think when Jesus says “I am the true vine” the first time, this is what he is revealing about God. There is a two fold revelation here. The first is “My Father is the vinedresser. Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” The struggle of the spiritual life is real. But the Christian should understand those struggles as preparations for greater fruitfulness. Because we are sinful, we don’t grow straight. The Father prunes off bad shoots. If we find certain paths that we really want to walk blocked, they might be blocked for a reason. They’ve been pruned off and we have been kept from them by the grace of God. Even thought it might not feel like that at the time.

The second revelation here is that Jesus – the Son of God – is here with us under the vinedresser. And that leads to a couple of thoughts. The first is that God prunes himself, God limits himself in some ways. Ultimately this leads back to the cross. God does not spare himself. Those are the deep roots that all in Christ are connected to. Which leads to the second thought that is more what Jesus emphasizes this first time. There is no fruit produced that is not connected to Jesus. “The branch cannot bear fruit by itself.” As long as we are connected to the vine – connected to Christ in faith – “you are already clean.” The Word has made you clean. The Word that you have heard preached. The Word connected to the waters of you baptism. The Word which makes the bread and wine the body and blood. These are all the ways you have been made clean and are connected to Christ. And so long as we abide in Christ – abide in his word in these things – we bear fruit. If we cut ourselves off, we die. There is no life outside of connection to Christ.

**Text – 2nd Vine**

Jesus utters the phrase a 2nd time. “I am the vine”. But this time instead of contemplating the relation to the Father, it is the purely our relation to Christ. “I am the vine, you are the branches.” And He develops the revelation further.

He repeats the idea of abiding. Apart from Christ the vine we can do nothing. But in Christ we shall bear much fruit. And it is worth contemplating this in the midst of spiritual struggle. It might not feel like we are bearing much fruit. But the promise is that if we abide in that Word, we shall. There are lots of places in the bible where we can go to understand what fruit is. One of the clearest is Paul’s passage on the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. And let’s be honest, these things are impossible to measure. The second we set out to graph and measure, all we see is how little we have. Or how far we have to go. But the promise is that we shall bear much fruit. I think the point of this is less worry about measurement, and more about staying connected to the vine. Let the vine and the vinedresser measure the fruit.

Because what Jesus emphasizes more this second time is what happens when we do not abide. “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.” The emphasis the second time through is on our actions. And it is not do we make fruit. It is do we abide in Christ.

**Moral/Eschatological**

The struggle of the spiritual life is to remain in Christ. And Jesus ends this section with the great promise of this spiritual life. If we are abiding in the Word, ask. “Ask, whatever you wish, and it will be done.” He says that this is “how my Father is glorified.” The life of the Father, flows through the son, and into you and me and all who abide in Jesus. And that life bears much fruit. And that fruit is the proof of the disciple.

The prayer of the disciple in the midst of the spiritual struggle of this world is two-fold. Lord, keep me connected to the vine. Don’t let me wither away from you. And Lord, let this struggle bring forth your fruit, that your name might be praised. That it might be praised on earth as it is in heaven. Let this life of fruitfulness be mine.

And grant me the eyes to see the fruit as the vinedresser does. Let your life, flow through mine and transfigure my perception. That I might see the victory in the daily struggle. That I might see the harvest you have prepared. Amen.