

For May 2, 2021; Easter 5; Acts 8:26-40; I John 4:1-21; John 15:1-8

Jesus sometimes made some strange statements about himself. "I am the bread of life;" "I am the Good Shepherd;" "I am the door;" "I am the light of the world;" "I am the gate;" "I am the way, the truth, and the life;" What strange statements. Does this mean that we are to look at him as a door, a light bulb, or a loaf of bread?

These statements do tell us something about who Jesus is, but they are the kind of thing that are not readily understood. They have to be "unpacked".

In order for us to understand what Jesus is claiming about himself, we have to think about what these picture words mean, and also look at how these phrases are used elsewhere, to discover what he means by them. That is the principle of letting scripture interpret scripture. I would add to this the principle to try and hear what is being said by listening from the perspective of the people Jesus is talking to originally.

Today we hear one of those enigmatic phrases again, and so, have to reflect on what it is that Jesus is claiming about himself. "I am the true vine." I have some bushes and trees in my backyard. I just transplanted them in to pots.

My wife buys tomato plants every year – getting them from a local store. This year, the ones she got looked near death. If my trees survive, they will not produce fruit this year, and I will transplant them to bigger pots. If I am lucky, I will get fruit from some of the trees in 2 – 3 years.

Handling of vines is different. It takes a greater deal of skill and knowledge.

This is the first thing that Jesus is claiming about himself - that there is one who is greater than him, who has "transplanted" him.

This is a claim that speaks of the greatness of Jesus. You see, as we discover elsewhere - including a couple of times that he simply says of himself "I am". The greek in many of those statements reflect the Hebrew name for God – one that is not spoken by anyone who is a practicing Jew, lest they misuse it. It is the 4 letters YHWH – which actually became the name "Jehovah" in some Bible translations.

This points to the fact that Jesus was God from the very beginning. This was a difficult operation that he went through. He was transplanted. He chose to lay aside the full glory of being God, in order to become a human being.

Think of the identity that Jesus knew he had. This is what he laid aside - but he also could not do it on his own. He needed the vine dresser – the one who had the skill to do the transplanting.

There is a second claim that is being made by Jesus by calling himself the true vine. It is from the vine that the branches and the grapes get their nutrients. But this one has to do with us, and we will get to that in a little while.

It is the third thing that Jesus is claiming for himself that I find most interesting. And this one has to do with something important about Jesus.

Jesus is the New Israel. This is a theme that the gospel of John comes to in a number of ways - and this is one of them. In the Old Testament, Israel is compared to a vine. In Psalm 80, Israel is called a vine that was brought out of Egypt, and transplanted. Isaiah 5 speaks of Israel as a vineyard. Hosea 10 speaks of Israel as a beautiful vine. Jeremiah speaks of Israel as a pure vine that degenerated to become a wild vine.

The point is - what Israel was meant to be, Jesus became.

Where the nation was to be pure and loyal to God, Jesus was.

Where the nation was meant to be humble and do the Father's will, Jesus did.

Where the nation was meant to be blessed to be a blessing to all people, Jesus was.

And where the vine of Israel was to feed the world with the love of God, Jesus did. That is some claim that Jesus is making about himself.

He is not only the vine - but the true vine. He is the one who actually did and lived the way Israel was to have lived.

That is some identity that Jesus is claiming for himself. "Jesus knew his identity, yet served with humility," we read in the letter of Phillipians

I am the vine - by which he tells us that his identity is the New Israel, that he is the fullness of God, and that he is the source of life for the grapes and branches.

This last one is what brings us to the second half of the theme: yet he served with humility.

The first way that this service happens is in cleansing. "You have already been cleansed by the word." That is to say that you are made holy - and are washed. This is the first great service that Christ has done - he makes us pure.

This washing is done through the power of the Word of Christ - that is the whole of the message of Christ himself. It is through him, and what he has done that you are made holy. I struggle with how expansive that is.

He was saying this to people who would deny him. Yet, they had been separated out by God for being the disciples of Jesus.

That word he speaks of which washes you is ultimately a word of life. That is the word that he has given to you - his life, which overcame death. That word in which we say "He is risen...He is risen indeed!"

And of this cleansing - of this washing - it is only a preparation for what is to come. It is how we are prepared for the next part of what he does to serve - he grafted us in to the vine.

You have to know that you were not originally part of the people of promise. God had chosen those who were the descendants of Abraham - but now he has grafted you into this vine.

That joining involved a dying. When a branch is joined to a vine, there has to be a cut that is made - a little piece of death. But the service of Christ was not just a little cut -

it was the death of Jesus himself. A wound that made it possible for you to be part of the vine.

You have been joined into the Kingdom of God. That is much more expansive than a small club of people who gather in a building once or twice a week. You have become part of Christ himself - that is what it means to be joined to the vine.

And then, he feeds you. You have been joined and cleansed through the Word of Christ - but this is how the service of Christ continues. He is not some faceless, nameless, distant God, but continues to feed and nourish you with His word. That word is a Word where he continues to give himself to you - in the scriptures, in the Word of God preached - and in the sacraments.

That word comes to you whenever two or more of us gather in his name - because there is the power of the one who continues to feed us.

Jesus knew his identity, yet served with humility.

Now, know your identity. You are one who has been cleansed by the word of God. You are one who has been grafted into the vine of Christ. You are one who continues to be fed with the life-giving knowledge of the Lord Jesus.

That means you are a branch in this vine that is Jesus. As a branch, you need to be supported by Christ. "You can do nothing apart from me." When I transplanted my bushes, I had to cut off some of the branches. When I look at those branches now, they are dry and dead.

Let me use the picture instead of a fire. There was man who was concerned about a friend of his who hadn't been to church for quite a long time. He decided to talk with his friend when they went on a fishing trip. One evening, as they sat next to the campfire, the man started talking about the need to continue to hear God's word and to be fed by that visible word in the Lord's Supper.

He stared at the fire, and noticed how it was made up of a number of logs. Using a tongs, he took one of the logs out, and let it sit. As they continue their conversation, it slowly changed from having a flame - to having some glowing embers - to being cold enough that the man could pick it up.

He looked at the cold log, and said, "alone, this is what happens. A Christian needs to live in the flame of Christ, or he weakens and dies in his faith." He then put the log back into the fire, and it started to burn again.

If you know you are a branch connected to Christ - you will want to abide - remain - live joined to Christ.

Then, you will be open to be served - that is fed by Christ. But you will also be served by being pruned.

Again, I have thought a little bit about what happens in pruning. Changes take place - that are not necessarily comfortable. Pruning involves cutting - cutting in ways that help the plant to produce more fruit.

We, too, find ourselves going through many changes in life. We can look at them as hardships - things that are blocks in our way - but we can also see in them how the hand of God is moving and working.

Forced to retire earlier than she had planned on, one woman saw it as an opportunity to do volunteer work at a local hospital. Another man, grieving the death of his wife, was able to begin to help others who were grieving their losses.

The late Walter Martin, an apologist for the Christian faith talked about having asthma most of his life. When the disease disappeared, he discovered that he had a great lung capacity, because of the years he had to fight to breath. This has allowed him to have a great deal of stamina - which became a great gift later in his ministry.

God is active in your life - and that activity is pruning and changing you. Know who you are - that you may serve. Bearing fruit is the goal of a branch. There are two ways that you can bear fruit - feeding others with the grace of God, and asking God for what you wish.

Actually those two go together - because, when you abide in Christ, what you are asking for is what will bring the grace of Christ alive in other's lives. And so you may feed others - as with the fruit of your actions - with the grace of Christ, and you can ask that that grace may grow in their lives.

Jesus, the true vine, gives us life and identity. We, his branches are fed by him, that we might give the grace of Christ to others.

Amen