

Today we begin a new 7-week preaching series entitled, **“Soul Food: Meeting Our Deepest Spiritual Needs in Christ.”** These are universal needs, and they are best met in following Jesus together. Notice that I didn’t say following Jesus as individuals but as a community. You all may have noticed that when we sing “Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on me” that I change it to “us.” I do the same with blessings around our table at home. Our daughter, Bailey, learned a blessing at camp or in childcare some years ago that goes, “A, B, C, D, E, F, G, thank you, God, for feeding me.” It’s one of her favorites due to its brevity, especially when she’s hungry. With my loud singing voice, I obnoxiously began changing the “me” to “us.” Well, Bailey and, my partner, Dean now sing, “A, B, C, D, E, F, Gus, thank you, God, for feeding us.” I can live with God being “Gus” for now. When Bailey was little, she, like most two-year-olds, would furrow her brows and say, “No! All by myself!” Dean and I would look at each other and sing another version of the chorus to Eric Carmen’s song, *All By Myself*. *All by myself. I can do it. All by myself.* “I can do it all by myself,” might be the perfect slogan for Western Christianity. We are products of a contemporary culture that celebrates the individual and distrusts the communal. “We experience the world today, more than ever before, as atomized individuals, with marketing algorithms on social media and internet sites pumping information to us that has been designed to appeal to our particular desires” (Brian S. Powers, *Connections*) and then we transfer this to our faith. Think about it. “We often represent the Christian life as a one-on-one transaction between a single believer and her God: ‘I accepted Jesus as *my* Savior.’” We put a lot of stock in our personal spiritual experiences: *my*

prayer life, *my* worship, *my* epiphany. If we do align ourselves with a larger Christian community, we generally do so with a consumer mindset, trusting that we're free to shop around, join up and quit as personal preference dictates. We struggle not to view dependence as moral weakness. We cherish our personal space and feel claustrophobic when other people press too close. We believe, of course, in loving our neighbors, but we feel most comfortable loving them from a distance, or at least with one eye trained on the nearest exit" (Debie Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). The temptation to go it on our own is real. Given this context in which we live, I cannot imagine a more in our face, counter-cultural, challenging vision of the Christian life than the one Jesus offers in today's text in the Gospel of John. The context of John 15 is a corporate invitation, and not simply a conversation with an individual. John 15 is part of a larger context from chapters 13-17, which feature Jesus' speech at the Last Supper- Maundy Thursday of what we call Holy Week. Here in chapter 15, Jesus instructs his disciples with his last declarative "I am" statement. Jesus, in preparing his disciples for his departure, not just in his death but also after the resurrection through his ascension, promises how with the help of the Holy Spirit, their community will function internally as a group and externally to the world. He wants them to be prepared, to remain in community with each other and to abide to his teaching and example. Before we turn to God's word, I want you to note that every "you" here in English is plural in Greek so where you hear "you," it's really "y'all." For example, "I am the vine, y'all are the branches." Got it? Good. Let us pray. **PRAY. READ.**

I want to take a poll this morning. Keep your hands up if any of these questions apply to you- how many of you “have been torn apart all week by the toxic false speech of politics? Or had your egos seduced by the cooing of commercials that assure you that you deserve more out of life- even when, deep down, you know when you’re being lied and condescended to as faceless consumers? Or have logged on to social media where anonymity hides destructive combat? Or have been overwhelmed by the cruelty of human beings toward one another” (*The Presbyterian Outlook*, Tom Long, 9.25)? Or feel like you don’t belong- even in this community of faith? Please stop exiling yourself from the vine, because of your beliefs about what you think it takes to belong to the body of Christ. No matter how a particular church or group treats you, I’m here to tell you that in Jesus Christ, you belong. You did not choose God; God chose you, and you’re connected to Christ. You belong on the vine simply because God says you do, not because of what you do or who you are, but because you are so loved by God. Some days we are firm in our faith as followers of Jesus. Some days we are like tired branches bearing over-ripe fruit. This means that we belong to the vine not because we are certain of God, but because God is certain of us, and no one, no action is able to remove us from the vine.

In Jesus’ explanation of life in the vineyard, everyone can see that they have a role but do not act by themselves but instead rely on the strength from the vine and the vine grower and when this happens, more fruit is produced. “A vine, for example, is not separate but rather indistinguishable from its branches, and as the branches in turn may be cut off, their whole

identity is nevertheless in the vine. Branches are never independent but always rooted and growing in Jesus” (Deirdre Good, *Connections*). In Jesus’ metaphor, we are branches, not the vine. If God is the vine grower, Jesus is the vine, and we are the branches, what should we do? We have only task: abide. We have a bit of a clue, as this word appears eight times in less than eight verses. The Greek root for “abide” (meno) carries a range of meanings- “staying in place,” “enduring,” “holding out”- all of which imply the steadfastness and reliability of God’s presence in and for God’s community (Barbara J. Essex, *FOW*). Commitment phoebes- beware! For in Christ, we’re called to stay in place- to hang in there for the long haul- to make ourselves at home with Jesus, the vine. “Abide” is a tricky word: passive on the one hand and active on the other. “To abide is to stay rooted in place. But it is also to grow, to change, and to multiply. It’s a vulnerable-making verb: if we abide, we’ll get pruned” (Thomas). Yes, vine branches have to be tended in order to bear fruit. “Left alone, vine branches, thick trailing plants that attach themselves to other things, will grow uncontrollably and result in one big tangled mess. A vine grower is needed to keep the vine and its branches in order. The mystery of the cleansing and pruning is that the plant looks useless and dead. Yet the branches’ connection to the vine ensures new life and new growth. Despite what the plant looks like, its connection to the vine renders it alive and not dead” (Essex, *FOW*). Triune has a fig tree- in the parking lot- next to the dumpster. I don’t know who planted it or any history about this tree. During COVID, which is when I arrived here, someone was asked to prune the fig tree. I knew nothing of the fig tree, but I did as soon as someone pruned it

because I received several laments of the poor pruning job that was done. “They’ve ruined the fig tree. It’ll never grow back.” Well, the fig tree not only came back, but it returned bearing lots of delicious figs, as many of you can attest.

“‘Abide’ is also a risky verb: if we abide, we’ll bear fruit that others will see and taste. It’s a humbling verb: if we abide, we’ll have to accept nourishment that is not of our own making” (Thomas). We aren’t the vine nor the vine grower. “And it’s a relentlessly communal verb- if we abide, we will have to coexist with our fellow branches. We will have to live a life that is messy, crowded, tangled, and gorgeous” (Thomas). Lutheran Pastor, Nadia Bolz Weber, says, “Christianity is a lousy religion for the ‘I’ll do it myself’ set. We are *meant* to be tangled up together. We are meant to live lives of profound interdependence, growing into, around, and out of each other. We cause pain and loss when we hold ourselves apart, because the fate of each individual branch affects the vine as a whole. In this metaphor, dependence is not a matter of personal morality or preference; it’s a matter of life and death- branches that refuse to cline to the vine die.” Who wants to believe this? I know I struggle with it. Perhaps we don’t want to believe it, “because it’s inconvenient and offensive? It implies that our lives are not our own. That our choices affect people we don’t even know. That we are bound to the community of God’s people whether such boundedness suits our temperament or not. Worse, it requires us to hold two seemingly contradictory truths in perpetual tension. One: that the point of my Christian life isn’t *me*- my growth, my contributions, my

achievements. I am inextricably connected to a larger whole, and apart from that whole, my spirituality- profound and precious though it might feel to me- is without value. Apart from the vine, I am not only barren; I am dead. And two: that we all- every branch- matter more than we can possibly imagine because the fruitfulness of God's vine is no trivial thing- it constitutes the life and nourishment of the world" (Thomas, journeywithjesus.net). Did you know that the best grapes are produced closest to the central vine? Yes. Because that's where the nutrients are the most concentrated. "To cut ourselves off from the vine, then, is to diminish our fruitfulness. It is to deny the world the fruit of Christ's saving, cleansing, healing love" (Thomas). Our challenge as a community is to stay connected to the vine and thus, to one another in love.

In light of God's acceptance of us, we can then turn to try and accept each other. It's you *and* me, not you *or* me. "'You and me' is a whole different way of being in the world. It begins with the simple recognition that we belong to one another. That what happens to you touches me. That your flourishing and mine are intertwined. It doesn't mean we always agree nor even like each other. But it does mean we stop pretending we can escape each other's humanity. We are entangled. Interwoven. Whether we like it or not. In this fractured, frantic world, I wonder if we're being invited to remember that love is not just a feeling-it's a stance, a way of moving through the world, a way of listening, seeing, showing up, a way of saying, again and again: *You and me. Still here. Still connected* in real relationship" (Rev. Cameron Trimble, e-votional). Sadly, it took a hurricane in the name

of Helene last year for many of us to realize this. Let's not wait for another disaster to come around before we show up as and for you and me.

"Soul Food" implies hunger and a feast of good cookin', not just for one but for many. "Soul food" can also mean spiritual hunger. Here at Christ's table we are fed both literally and figuratively. This "soul food" nourishes and sustains us. Always remember that in life and in death, we belong to God. God has chosen us and Christ commands us to abide in him. I can't imagine that there was ever a time when Jesus' followers found the metaphor of the vine easy to apply in daily life. "It's hard in our self-promoting culture to confess that we are lost and lifeless on our own. That our glory lies in surrender, not self-sufficiency. That Jesus is truly the very source and sustainer of our lives. That Jesus isn't sitting around waiting for us to get organized, but that he has already started nourishing the world through us" (Thomas). Whether we like it or not, our lives are bound up in his and in each other's. It's you and me- not you or me. We belong together. As the African proverb proclaims, "Because we are, I am." What if Jesus' words weren't a threat but a promise?! When we abide in the truth of who we are and who God is, then all over competing claims about who we are simply melt away. When we're connected to Jesus, we bear the fruit of Jesus. Jesus simplified it: the measure of spiritual maturity is love. As the song states in the musical *Les Miserables*, "To love another person is to see the face of God." Friends, "the only fruit worth sharing with the world is the fruit we produce together. This is what we were made for" (Thomas)! Thanks be to God! Amen.