

March 31, 2019

I Am

*I Am the Vine*

John 15:1-8

**Opening words:** The Gospel of John is preoccupied with the deity of Jesus. Chapter one sets the tone for the rest of the book. In that chapter, John declares Jesus, the Word, to be God, and goes on to say, "the Word became flesh and dwelt among us." He announces that in Jesus, the glory of God has been seen, and he further speaks of Jesus as the One who has made the invisible God known. And then, we have the multiple "I Am" sayings scattered throughout John's gospel. The title "I Am" is the divine name revealed to Moses by God in Exodus 3:14 from the burning bush. By taking on this name, Jesus claimed to be God! The "I Am" sayings not only speak of Jesus' identity, but each of the seven "I Am" sayings reveal an aspect of Jesus' mission.

During this season of Lent I have been looking at the "I Am" saying of Jesus. I began on Ash Wednesday and looked at the original "I Am" statement in Exodus 3. Then, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal satisfaction, "I am the bread of life". Then, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal hope, "I am the light of the world". Last week, I looked at Jesus's statement of eternal love, "I am the good shepherd". Today, we look at Jesus's statement of eternal power. Our scripture reading for today is John 15:1-8. Let me call this message *I Am the Vine*.

**John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup> "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup> If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

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Ann Coulter (born 1961) is a conservative American social and political commentator. She once said, "*I know that Jesus Christ died for my sins, and that is all I need to know.*" I love that quote because it is so accurate. If you can understand that quote, then you can understand this message. If you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen**".

We find ourselves today in the fifteenth chapter of John. It is important that you know, it is late in Jesus's earthly ministry. Chapters fourteen, fifteen and sixteen have been called the "Farewell Discourses." Jesus knew he would soon be crucified. He is

preparing his followers for his absence, and what it would mean to them. It is a critical time for Jesus's ministry. It must have been an emotional time for the disciples, so Jesus offers them some words of hope. Our generation does not hear the hope, but that generation heard the hope. Jesus said, *"I am the vine."* Those words grabbed their attention because, like a bald eagle represents America, so the vineyard represented Israel. The next words must have shaken that generation to its very core. They were nothing more than branches in the vineyard; it was God who was the gardener. They knew the truth. It was the gardener's job to maximize the harvest of the vineyard. That means, God Himself was responsible to maximize the harvest. The best way to maximize the harvest was to cut off the unproductive branches. Those branches would be collected, burned and forgotten. Jesus challenges them, and us, to produce, or we too will be collected, burned and forgotten. The only way to produce is to remain in him. It is impossible to produce without Jesus. I believe that simple analogy speaks to our generation.

On the corner of Third Street and Lexington Avenue in Danville, Kentucky is a large brick church. I have spoken of it in the past. Years ago, I drove by it regularly. I always admired the structure. The brick was formidable. The doors were welcoming. The spire reached to the heavens, and the landscaping was flawless. Etched in the stone in the front of the church were the words: First Presbyterian Church. One day, I had a few extra minutes, so I decided to visit that church. My car sat alone in the massive parking lot in the middle of the week. I walked toward the back door and was surprised to see a sticker displaying the hours of operation. They were opened every day from 10:00 am until 9:00 pm, but they were closed on Sunday. Confused, I opened the door, and expected to enter the sanctuary. Instead, I entered the showroom. Couches filled the choir loft. Chairs and love seats sat where the pews once sat. Mattresses and box springs filled the chancel. Children's furniture filled the narthex. A salesman asked me if I needed some help, but there was nothing he could do. The church was gone and only a furniture store remained. Later, I found out the First Presbyterian Church merged with another Presbyterian Church in the community. They vacated that location and went to the other building, which was more economically sensible for their sagging membership. That church, now a furniture store, taught me something I have never forgotten. Every church is one generation away from closing. If you don't believe me, then ask the approximately 8,000 congregations that close in America annually. That leads us to the question that has haunted my generation of clergy our entire career.

Why do churches close? This is not the first time we have looked at that question during my time here. Countless articles have been written to answer that question. There are many lists that look similar. Thom S. Rainer (born 1955) is an American Southern Baptist writer, researcher, speaker and former President of LifeWay Christian Resources. He released an article on September 14, 2016 called [Five Reasons Why Churches are Dying and Declining Faster Today](#). These are his five reasons (I think he is right):

1. **Cultural Christianity is on the decline.** In America, church membership is no longer seen as culturally, politically or economically advantageous. At one time, church membership was a social requirement. Now, it is an option. According to the Pew Research Group, only 37% of Americans worship regularly. Christianity is on the decline. If you find some truth in that statement say, **"Amen!"**
2. **The exit of the "builder" generation.** The world changed in 1946. If you were born prior to 1946, you are stereotypically loyal to organizations and institutions. It is not just true of churches. It is true of service clubs, Masonic organizations and bowling leagues. Every week, another 13,000 members of the builder generation die. Younger generations aren't bad. Younger generations simply don't have time to join organizations. They are too busy working and raising their children. That statement is true. If you find some truth in that statement, say, **"Amen!"**
3. **The American population base is shifting toward cities.** In 1790, only 5% of Americans lived in cities. Today, 80% of Americans live in, or near, cities. Small-membership country churches are dying because no one lives in the country. My grandfather, Roger Adams, was the first family member to leave the farm. It is impossible to have a church without people. That statement is true. If you find some truth in that statement, say, **"Amen!"**
4. **American worshippers no longer respect the traditional barriers.** Family traditions, denominational loyalty and loyalty to a specific congregation are no longer compelling factors. We experience that regularly. How many of you were not raised a United Methodist? I wasn't. People move from church to church. That statement is true. If you find some truth in that statement, say, **"Amen!"**
5. **Churches are slow to accept change.** Our society is changing rapidly, but the church is slow to change. We used to say, the church was ten years behind the times. Today, it is more like the church is thirty to forty years behind the times. Group dynamics tell us we can only move as fast as the slowest person. How many slow people do you know? That statement is true. If you find some truth in that statement, say, **"Amen!"**

I cannot disagree with that list. However, I believe there is another reason why we are dying. Number six does not come from Thom S. Rainer. It comes from Russ Adams, and his thirty-five years in the ministry.

6. **The American church is dying because we are easily distracted.** What does the scripture lesson tell us today? It says that Jesus is the vine and we, the church, are supposed to stay connected to the vine. If we stay connected

to the vine, we will bear fruit and make disciples for Jesus Christ. If we get disconnected from the vine, we won't bear fruit and will die. This is the danger: In the life of the church, we can become consumed with good things, and forget about the best thing, Jesus! This has become one of my favorite themes.

How many distractions exist within the life of this church? Building maintenance can be a distraction. The budget can be a distraction. The landscaping of the church property can be a distraction. Fundraising can be a distraction. Music can be a distraction. Worship style can be a distraction. Church camp, Sunday school and mission trips can be a distraction. Don't miss my point. I am not telling you to get rid of any of those things, because each one is important in its own way. I am telling you to be on guard. None of those things will produce fruit alone. We need Jesus. The church doesn't have a future without Jesus, the vine. The church doesn't have anything, if it doesn't have Jesus! The moment we become disconnected from Jesus, the vine, we stop being the church God intended. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Perhaps the greatest distraction in the history of Methodism occurred in St. Louis several weeks ago. We have spent countless hours discussing the topic of sexuality. The issue was simple, and everyone was forced to choose a side. On one side, there were the traditionalists. Historically, we have never ordained openly gay people or married openly gay couples. They pointed to certain Bible verses and wore their heavy crosses. On the other side, there were the progressives. They said, it was time for a change. God loves everyone and sexuality isn't a choice. They pointed to other Bible verses and wrapped themselves in rainbows. The stakes were high, and no one knew what would happen. The only thing guaranteed was that many would be mad. After spending millions of dollars to decide, nothing changed. Those who wanted change are now mad. Those who didn't want change are smug. The losers are now threatening to leave the denomination they said they loved. It is a sad day in the history of our denomination because amid the battle we seemed to forget why we exist, Jesus! The only one who is truly happy is Satan, because in the debate, we used Jesus only to support our own opinions. Could it be our denomination is struggling because we have become disconnected from the vine? We need to stop talking about sexuality and start talking about Jesus again. If you find some truth in that statement, say, "**Amen!**"

Several years ago, I was asked to officiate at a wedding for someone outside of this church. The bride was a friend of a church member. They did not want to get married in this building. They wanted to get married at Butler North. Do you know Butler North? It is part of the Butler Art Museum on Wick Avenue in downtown Youngstown. The Butler Art Museum is one of the bright lights in this community. I have nothing negative to say about it. Butler North is a relatively new addition to the museum. For years, the building was the home of the First Christian Church (Disciples of Christ). I looked forward to officiating at the wedding because the building, itself, is impressive. When I arrived at the former church, now part of the museum, I wasn't disappointed. The

museum had made some wonderful improvements, but the heart of the old sanctuary remained the same. There was a long center aisle for the bride. The pews were gone, but seats welcomed visitors. The chancel area remained intact, except for the missing pipe organ. It took no imagination to recognize it was once a church. When the moment came, the music was piped out through large speakers. The men walked in on cue and the women walked alone down the aisle. Everyone stood, as the bride and her father entered the one-time sanctuary. Everyone sat on my command. Everything was perfect. That was why I was so surprised. As I said the words that I had uttered countless times, I noticed something. This is the truth: When you speak in a church, the words come to life. It is like the words fly. Part of it is the surroundings, part of it is the group who has gathered. In other places, the words just hit the floor. On that day, the words hit the floor. I shouldn't have been surprised. That building was once a church, but it wasn't anymore. Everything was there to make it a church, but one thing was missing. Do you know what was missing?

What was missing was Jesus. There is nothing wrong with being an art museum, but an art museum isn't a church. On the day the church becomes disconnected from Jesus, it stops being the church. Ann Coulter once said, "*I know that Jesus Christ died for my sins, and that is all I need to know.*" And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**" Jesus said it clearly: *I am the vine.*