

## John 15:1-8

### Intro

So as I started to write the sermon for this morning, it came out differently than I normally write. This is not an apology.

Rather, it is a head's up so that you don't distract yourself with the 'inside your head' question of, 'what's going on?'

Are you willing to come along with me? Well, even if you aren't, here we go!

One of the realities of the Gospel of John is that it wants us to not only know the events of the ministry and life of Jesus, it wants us to experience, to feel what it means to walk in faith with Jesus.

One of the ways that this is able to be articulated is through the seven 'I am' statements that Jesus makes throughout John's Gospel. These metaphorical proclamations allow us to understand who Jesus is by the things that he compares himself to. In order to have a greater appreciation of what we are about to hear, it is extremely helpful to have the other comparison touchstones in our purview.

The first comes to us in John 6 (verses 35, 48, and 51) when Jesus says, '***I am the bread of life***'. Coming on the heels of feeding the 5000 (which for the Israelites, connects Jesus to Moses and the miraculous manna that was able to fall from the heavens during the time of wandering in the wilderness), Jesus is saying, 'bread is good, but it is temporary. Abide in me and you will hunger no more'. This is meant for the reader in a, 'why am I here' sort of way. Jesus is telling us that the desire that we feel, that there's something more to our life, that it's a real, yearning. The thing is, if we try and fill that yearning through things that come and go (food, pleasure, money, stuff), we're never going to be satisfied.

However, if we abide in Jesus, then that satisfaction that we ache for, the 'do I have a purpose in this life' query begins to find its resolution. Jesus answers the questions and doubts we have about ourselves...if we lean into him.

### ***I am...the bread of life.***

The second moment takes place after Jesus offers the statement of, 'Let anyone among you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone'. Jesus' words were quite literal as he is confronted by the Pharisees with a woman who has been caught in the act of adultery. The punishment under the law of Moses? Stoning. There are literally people holding rocks standing around Jesus and this woman, waiting to unleash judgment as this profound declaration is made.

What happens? They walk away. They all walk away struck by the grace and forgiveness that Jesus calls them to exhibit (as well as their own guilt) until it's 'just' Jesus and the woman which concludes with Jesus asking her if anyone has condemned her (she says, 'no'), to which he concludes, 'neither do I condemn you. Go your way, and from now on do not sin again.'

It is in the reality of this spiritual brokenness that Jesus offers light, he extends forgiveness, to which we hear, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.'

What do you carry that drags you down? Is it worry and discouragement, sin and waywardness, financial or health problems? All of them are areas of spiritual need that need relief and assistance; they need light. Therefore what do they need? Jesus. Yes, there are worldly recourses that need to be taken (when you are sick you do go to the doctor), but each of those steps need to be seen through the prism that Jesus provides the guidance, care, and direction that we need. We need Jesus.

***I am...the light of the world.***

The third and fourth 'I am' declarations arise out of miraculous healing of a man who had been blind since birth (John 10). This healing takes place on the Sabbath and causes the Pharisees to have more than a bit of consternation for they have someone who has 'broken the law', and yet, what he has done clearly points to being an example of God's miraculous healing.

So the Pharisees bring in the formerly blind man to ask him some questions about how he was healed.

Then they bring in the formerly blind man's parents, you know because the Pharisees are wondering if a fast one is being pulled on them. Their response (in the days prior to fingerprinting and genetic verification)? 'Uh, yeah, this is our child? Why aren't you celebrating this like we are?'

But that's still not enough as they then call the man back in again which provides us with the absolutely fabulous response to, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' of, 'I have already told you...twice! Why do you want to hear it again?'

Seriously, can't you picture that happening? I love it!

But he does keep talking, proclaiming in not so many words that Jesus is of God ('here I am; I can see!'), and that the Pharisees are blind if they can't see that truth (interesting way that got turned around, don't you think?).

Well, that wasn't appreciated by the religious leadership...and the formally blind man is driven out of the city (can you imagine the social media uproar in today's world if that would have happened? Exactly! Not good.)

Well, Jesus finds this man again and after revealing to him that he is the Son of God (which elicits the reply of, 'Lord, I believe'), Jesus states the following, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind'.

It is out of this context that Jesus declares, 'I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.' There is no ambiguity: Jesus is the way to abundant life and life eternal. This will be achieved, not because of anything that we (you know, the sheep...in an analogous sense) anything we do, but because of who Jesus is (which is the next 'I am' statement, which we actually heard last week): 'I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'

***'I am...the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture.'***

***'I am...the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep.'***

This understanding is confirmed by the next 'I am' which is found in in the midst of a conversation between Jesus and Martha who is grieving the death of her brother Lazarus. It sounds this way.

### **John 11:21-27**

<sup>21</sup>Martha said to Jesus, 'Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died. <sup>22</sup>But even now I know that God will give you whatever you ask of him.' <sup>23</sup>Jesus said to her, 'Your brother will rise again.' <sup>24</sup>Martha said to him, 'I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day.' <sup>25</sup>Jesus said to her, 'I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, <sup>26</sup>and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die. Do you believe this?' <sup>27</sup>She said to him, 'Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Messiah, the Son of God, the one coming into the world.'

As the Good Shepherd, Jesus leads all those who believe (those who know his voice) through the gate to the resurrection and the life.

### ***'I am...the resurrection and the life.'***

The last two 'I am's' come to us on Maundy Thursday, after what we know as The Last Supper, Judas leaving the room 'to do what he was going to do', and Peter being rebuked that before the cock crows that he will deny Jesus three times.

The disciples, the believers in Jesus, have to be wondering what's going on because it very much appears that the wheels are falling off this vehicle of faith (the savior dying does not feel like a victory in most strategic playbooks). It is in these 'unknown to us' waters that Jesus provides a series of statements and examples that are meant to comfort, reassure, and soothe. It is on the heels of, 'Do not let your hearts be troubled.', that we hear Jesus declares in John 14:6, 'I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.' Jesus is doubling down proclaiming to his friends, to us, to all who will listen, 'I am...the way, the truth, and the life.' Jesus knows what is about to transpire in the events of Maundy Thursday and Good Friday and he reaches out to reassure and emphasize that regardless of what is about to be seen and felt, that you need to have faith, that what you are being led to believe in God is real.

Which leads us to our last 'I am', our scripture for today. What it reiterates is that we need to be close to Jesus. Jesus cannot be an afterthought. Jesus must be a part of every thought. Well, how close to Jesus are you? How close (as we hear described in the scriptures) are we supposed to be? What is the difference between those two answers? How do we traverse the difference? The scripture reads this way.

### **John 15:1-8**

<sup>1</sup>***'I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower.'*** <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We are talking about all of these I am statements because they are connected, providing a surge that not only describes who Jesus is (the Good shepherd), what he does (providing bread, light, and the way), and the consequences of his presence in the world (life and life eternal), but then the necessary faithful response (be connected to me).

Jesus wants you close to him, connected to him, abiding in him (and therefore him in you)! That is who Jesus is...and who we are...if we are willing to respond to the subtle and not so subtle reminders, that this is the life that the God of all Creation is inviting us to embrace.

So how close are you? And hear that question, not from a place of guilt, but from a place of longing. Again, the author of the Gospel of John (and therefore God Himself) wants us to experience, to feel what it means to walk in faith with Jesus. How close are you?

Alright, so let's try and answer that question by asking some others, and mind you, like the confirmation class hears all the time, I'm not looking for the answer that you think God wants you to say: God wants the answer for where you are really at...because that honesty is step one in walking with Jesus (see, already on your way!).

Now, the responses to these questions come in the form of prayers, conversations with God, conversations that are ongoing, conversations that open the door to the Holy Spirit to work. And if you're not sure about the whole prayer thing being worth your time (because you aren't sure if this whole God thing is real, or that God is listening or will respond), one more question for you, what's it going to cost you? Prayer costs you nothing, and it opens the door to...everything.

So, question number 1: do you believe that Jesus died and was raised from the dead...for you? I know, we're in church so some people think everyone's got that one figured out. I'm not willing to buy that. If you struggle with that, be honest about it...and pray, 'God, let me know the truth of Your Son.'

Question 2: how well do you actually know the message that Jesus offers? And I don't just mean the truncated, chicken nugget version of Jesus message that we get on a Sunday morning (because we can't stay in worship forever...you know until we can (think about it!!)). Children of God, open it up; find someone else who will read it with you; find a study group that allows you to hear the story that takes place between the story; ask the minister (wait did I just say that? Yes, yes I did!). You want to walk closer with Jesus, then we need to know who Jesus is through who he showed himself to be. If you struggle with that, be honest...and pray, 'God, let me know Your son.'

Question 3: do you believe that Jesus can support you in all your needs? As we talked about in regard to the 'I am' statements, everything that we do, face, struggle with, celebrate, is held by the Savior of all. Invite Jesus in to your life: to the totality of your life. Fears? Invite Jesus. Health diagnosis? Invite Jesus. Financial struggles? Invite Jesus. Successes that make you want to go out and celebrate like it's 1999 (I don't know, I heard that in a song somewhere)? Invite Jesus. If you struggle with that, be honest...and pray, 'God, I turn my life over to You.'

Can you feel where this is going?

Like the wave that we are able to feel through the 'I am' statements that Jesus makes, the journey of a faithful walk is one that (when we open the door to actually embracing it) transforms who we are and how we live. Life is still life...and we understand that we are held by a Savior who loves us so much that

when we abide in him as the vine that he is, we are able to bear much good fruit as the branches that we are. Yes, there will be trimming that necessarily takes place and that happens in order for new and greater growth to take place.

How close are you to Jesus? He wants you closer.

Do you believe that Jesus died and was raised from the dead...for you? How well do you actually know the message that Jesus offers? Do you do you believe that Jesus can support you in all your needs?

Be honest and remember the prayers: 'God, let me know the truth of Your Son.', 'God, let me know Your son.', 'God, I turn my life over to You.'

Seven times Jesus said, 'I am'. He told us who he is. Open the door...allow your life to transformed by allowing your belief to be turned into a living faith.

Jesus wants you closer.

### **After Sermon Prayer**

Lord, Your declarations show us who You are and how You love and lead. God, we open the door by placing before You all that we carry, from our lack of knowing, to our overwhelming doubts, to our generalized apathy. God, You want us closer. We open the door, now, today, the days that are to come. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.