# SERMON SERIES: INVITATIONS

# “Remain In Me”

## ***John 15:1-5***

Today brings us to the conclusion of our four-week sermon series entitled “Invitations.” Throughout this series we’ve explored the steps that Jesus invites us to take in our discipleship. The first step is that of ‘come and see.’ Jesus invites people to spend time with him and to ask questions—all with no strings attached. For us today this means inviting people to explore our church, to watch how we live as Christ’s representatives, and to assess how consistently our behaviors match our words.

The second step is ‘come and follow.’ This invitation asks us to make a deeper commitment, to choose whether or not we will follow in the ways of Jesus. He calls us to lay aside our plans and wills, and to commit to a greater, deeper set of responsibilities and obligations under his lordship.

Last Sunday we explored the third step, ‘come and be with me.’ With each step Jesus challenged his followers to move to a higher level of dedication. He “turned up the heat,” so to speak. When we’re invited to come and be with Jesus, we’re being asked to surrender more intentionally and willingly than ever before. We’re to watch Jesus at work in the world and to join him in that work.

Jesus always drew great crowds wherever he went. They responded to the invitation to ‘come and see.’ But many of the teachings Jesus presented were difficult for people to grasp--or they were deemed offensive or controversial--and as a result many would-be followers turned away. Jesus weeded out the pretenders from the contenders whenever he issued the invitation to ‘come and follow.’ Then, with the invitation to “come and be with me,” Jesus raised the stakes even higher, and consequently fewer people were willing to accept the invitation.

Turn in your Bible to John 15:1-5.

***Following the resurrection and ascension of Jesus, the book of Acts tells us that the followers of Jesus were about one hundred twenty in number (1:15). Think about that for a moment: after three continuous years of ministry, countless teachings, and multiple miracles, all Jesus could claim was a following of one hundred twenty people. By today’s standards of success we’d say that Jesus hadn’t been very effective. Shouldn’t a pastor, preacher, teacher and leader like Jesus have had hundreds—if not thousands—of followers? That’s how we tend to think today. We assess a church or pastor or ministry based on how many numbers they have. But Jesus wasn’t interested in gathering and maintaining huge numbers. He was interested in gathering and maintaining disciples who were fully committed to his mission. I’ve always said that Jesus can do more with a group of thirty Spirit-filled, dedicated, Jesus-loving, willing servants than he can with a church of three hundred or three thousand who just want to be seen, consume or control. It’s not the amount of people that make a difference: it’s the amount of people who’re willing to submit to the lordship of Jesus Christ, no matter the cost, that make a difference.***

That submission—that obedience—that radical willingness to keep Christ at the very center of life—is found in the fourth and final step in the discipleship process: the invitation to ‘remain in me.’

*“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. 2He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more. 3You have already been pruned and purified by the message I have given you. 4Remain in me, and I will remain in you. For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot be fruitful unless you remain in me. 5Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”*

Remain in me.

One final time Jesus turns up the heat. He asks us to take another step up, one that requires an even stronger level of commitment and responsibility, one that places us in the very heart of God himself.

The Greek word translated here as “remain” or “abide” is a figurative expression of someone who doesn’t leave the place in which he finds himself. He’s settled in for the long haul. He’s put down roots. John used this term throughout his gospel—eleven times in this one chapter alone--to denote an inward, ongoing personal communion with God. This means more than simply continuing to believe in Jesus, although it includes that. It means to continue living in intimate union or association with him.

***We might think of it this way: You’re familiar with a visit to the eye doctor when they put that little silver machine up to your eyes, and ask you to focus on a line of letters across the room. As the doctor manipulates the controls to make your eyes cross, you’re asked to tell her when you see two rows of letters. Then you have to say when the two rows slide back into one. The invitation to ‘remain in me’ is like the two going back into one. Who we are, what we do, and how we behave, become interconnected with the person of Jesus.*** ***In our Wesleyan language, we call this “progressive sanctification,” or “going on to perfection.”***

To respond to this invitation means that we sin less, and love God and neighbor more. It means we’re willing to see the world through the eyes of Jesus, and to respond with the same compassion he has. It means our hearts beat in unison with God’s heart. We’re growing, not just in our faith and belief, but in our willingness to imitate Jesus with growing devotion.

Jesus tells his disciples, “*Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing.”* If we respond to the invitation to remain connected to Jesus, then we’ll produce fruit. Inother words, the more we surrender ourselves and walk in harmony with Jesus, the more God is able to use us to touch lives and change the world. “*For a branch cannot produce fruit if it is severed from the vine, and you cannot bear fruitful unless you remain in me.”* If Jesus remained in intimate connection with his Father, doing what the Father did and saying what the Father said, it stands to reason that we too must remain in intimate connection with Jesus. By doing so, we allow ourselves to be taught; to imitate the Master; to work alongside of him; and to be a positive force for the growth of the kingdom.

Three types of believers are inferred in this passage: those who bear no fruit, those who bear some fruit, and those who bear much fruit. *“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit, and he prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.* *…Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit.”* We already know the goal is for maturing disciples to bear “*much fruit*.” So what about the other two groups?

Most Scripture references to John 15:2 talk about God “cutting off” the unfruitful branch. This can easily be misinterpreted to suggest that if you don’t win someone to Jesus you’ll be cut off, or that if you don’t do this or that, you’ll be cut off. That’s not what is meant here! This passage isn’t talking about losing our salvation or losing God’s grace. It’s about remaining, abiding, being fully grounded in our relationship with Jesus.

The Greek word translated as “cut off” or “removed” has another meaning, one which more accurately describes God’s caring work as the divine Gardener. The Greek word is *airo* (aye-ro, ), and it also means “to lift up” or “to pick up”—as in to pick up a rock or lift up your hands in praise. Given this understanding, the text becomes *“I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. He* ***lifts up*** *every branch of mine that doesn’t produce fruit…* This is surely the work of a vinedresser or gardener: to lift up the branches that have drooped down, and to expose them to the sun once again so they may produce fruit. Instead of trying to read this text as a threat or guilt-trip about not winning people to Christ, perhaps we would do better to understand it as God’s tender, loving attention to those branches which are capable of producing fruit, but which need to be picked up and placed back in his light.

The second group is the branches which produce some fruit: “*He prunes the branches that do bear fruit so they will produce even more.”* God’s pruning here is about making clean again. The branches which are fruit-bearing need to be periodically stripped of superfluous wood or leaves so they can continue to serve their purpose. We often experience this pruning or cleansing when we go on a spiritual retreat or to Resurrection, attend a conference, or even engage in heartfelt worship. God renews and restores our hopes and spirits; he grants us rest and renewed energy to continue bearing fruit.

When we respond to the invitation to ‘remain in me,’ we’re submitting ourselves to be a fruit-bearing branch connected to the vine of Jesus Christ. We’re saying that we’ll immerse ourselves more deeply in the Word of God in order to know the Lord’s will. We agree that we’ll make ourselves available to serve others and be used however God sees fit. We’re taking a vow that we’ll invest time in prayer, meditation and study of the Scriptures. ***There can be no connection to the vine without interaction with the vine. Sitting in a building once a week or attending a committee meeting does not make us fruit-bearers.***

There are a lot of branches here today, all connected to the vine in different places. Maybe you feel like a branch that’s drooped away from the sun. You haven’t been producing fruit. You’re in need of the divine Gardener’s touch to lift you up, and return you to the warmth of the sun’s rays.

Some branches today have been producing fruit and are in need of cleaning. They’ve labored long and well, and find themselves in need of refreshing and renewal. They need gentle pruning to remove the callousness of life and the jaded perspectives of our society. They’ve produced fruit, and will continue to do so, when they receive God’s gracious touch to heal and restore.

Other branches continue to produce much fruit. They’re strongly and intimately united with the vine, and their lives exhibit the qualities and characteristics of Jesus himself. These blessed servants are to be commended for their dedication, love, compassion and faithfulness. The kingdom expands because of the Holy Spirit’s work in and through you.

The four steps of discipleship that we’re called to follow are the same ones we’re called to offer to those outside the church—those who make up the seventy percent of the unreached and unchurched around us. God still longs to reach the lost, and he desires for his church to live out the invitations we have received--first among ourselves--then among the people in our society.

Come and see.

Come and follow.

Come and be with me.

Remain in me.

As we close this morning, we’re going to have time at the altar for all the branches to spend time with the vine. As I said a moment ago, some branches need to be encouraged and lifted up so they can produce fruit. Some need to be refreshed and renewed. Some need to hear “Well done, good and faithful servant.” Bring someone with you if you’d like.

Someone here may feel the nudging of the Holy Spirit to take the next step of discipleship. Maybe you need to ‘come and follow’ or ‘come and be with me.’ You’re invited to this altar to tell the Lord that, and to offer yourself in humble submission. As our music plays, come now, all who need and desire this time of strength, renewal and encouragement. Amen.