



"What is God Like?"
Scripture – John 15:1-11
Sermon preached by Sudie Niesen Thompson
Sunday, September 5, 2021

"I AM" Sermon Series:

If four artists were to paint the same model, they would create four unique portraits. Their works would differ based on perspective, personal style, or simply the play of the light. In the same way, the four Gospel writers create four unique portraits of Jesus the Messiah. One way John paints his portrait is through metaphor — comparing Christ to images that would be familiar to the Gospel's original audience: bread, light, shepherd, vine. Throughout the Gospel, Jesus likens himself to various objects and concepts through statements that always begin the same way: "I am ..." During Dr. Jones' sabbatical, the Rev. Sudie Niesen Thompson — along with the Rev. Jill Getty and the Rev. Dr. Tracy Keenan — will explore the seven "I AM" statements of John's Gospel and the ways they contribute to a unique portrait of the Messiah who dwells among us.

"What is God Like?" which focuses on the statement, "I am the True Vine," is the seventh sermon in the series.

What is God like? That's a very big question, one that people from places all around the world have wondered about since the beginning of time.

So begins the children's book, *What is God Like?*¹ With whimsical illustrations and text that is simple but profound, this book offers image after image after image that, when taken together, give us some sense of what God is like:

God is like a river, constant and life giving. When you grow near God, you'll sprout up strong as a tree.

God is like a fort, strong and secure with walls that are mighty and safe. Inside, there are hidden places to hold you when you're scared or need a quiet place to rest.

God is like a mother, strong and safe. You can crawl up into her lap whenever you want to, and she will hold you until you fall asleep.

¹ Rachel Held Evans and Matthew Paul Turner, *What is God Like?* (Convergent, 2021)

God is like a father, gentle and safe. He will put you on top of his shoulders to give you a bird's-eye view of all creation.

When I read this book with my three-year-old, she is always on the look-out for God. She'll point to the picture of the family curled up inside their blanket fort or to the image of a little boy riding atop his father's shoulders and ask, "Mommy, is that God?" Contrary to popular belief, pastors do *not* always have the answers to questions about God — especially when they come from small children. Responses that are age-appropriate and true are rarely on the tip of my tongue. So I usually defer to the words at the end of this children's book: *Whenever you aren't sure what God is like, think about what makes you feel safe, what makes you feel brave, and what makes you feel loved. That's what God is like.* As a pastor and a parent, I am grateful for this book. It is beautiful, and its feast of images feels refreshing and new. But using simile and metaphor is actually an established way to tackle the very big mystery of God. You see, this is exactly what Jesus is doing through the I AM Statements of the Gospel of John; he is setting before us image after image after image that, when taken together, give us some sense of what God is like:

God is like Bread — ordinary bread, the very substance we rely upon to satisfy hunger and sustain life. Those who eat of this bread will forever be filled.

God is like Light, which pierces the darkness and illumines our way — no longer (as the hymn says) "in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes," but fully accessible in the person of Jesus the Christ.

God is like a Shepherd, who gathers sheep into the safety of the fold, and leads them out to graze in pastures green. In the Shepherd's care, the flock flourishes; the sheep enjoy protection *and* provision — everything needed to experience the abundance of life.

But no single metaphor is enough. It is the feast of images Jesus sets before us, that — together — help us understand what God is like. With each illustration, Jesus draws us deeper into relationship with the Holy One. "This is who I AM," he says. "I am the resurrection. I am the way, the truth, and the life. I am the vine." Time and again, Jesus tells his disciples *who he is* so that they — and *we* — might come to know God more fully, more intimately ... so that we *all* might abide in God's love. Relationship is at the heart of the final I AM saying Jesus utters. Here — in the middle of a speech scholars call the Farewell Discourse — Jesus holds out an image of dependence, of mutuality, of intimacy. "I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." At this point in the Gospel, Jesus is preparing his followers for his impending death. Only minutes before, he knelt before his disciples to wash their feet; and, as soon as Jesus finishes his farewell speech, he will go out to a garden where soldiers will arrest him. His hour has come to depart from this world. But the invitation to relationship endures. Even after Jesus returns to the Father, his followers can still abide in the love they've witnessed in countless moments — as water turned into wine at a wedding in Cana; when five loaves and two fish miraculously multiplied to feed a multitude; as water flowed over dusty feet, poured out by the hand of a master embracing the role of a servant. Love embodied, enacted, imprinted on the heart of disciples: This is what Jesus promises when he says, "I am the vine" — Even after Jesus ascends into heaven, his followers can dwell in the God who dwelled among us as the Incarnate One, the Word-made-Flesh. In fact, we *must* dwell in the love of the God who dwelled among us ... otherwise we will wither, otherwise we will never produce any fruit.

Earlier this summer my family spent a week in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia. While in the area we visited a Lavender Farm and Winery. Bordering the fields of sweet-smelling lavender were rows of grape plants, their vines twining along the trellises. It was early in the season — weeks before the harvest — but the leaves were verdant and lush, and clusters of grapes were growing plentifully. The branches were not yet heavy with the weight of the fruit, but it appeared the plants were primed to produce an abundant harvest. As I walked up and down the rows, I didn't pay any attention to the vines; I was too busy pointing out the clusters of grapes to my daughter.

But, of course, the vines must have been vigorous — healthy, well-tended, watered just enough. Otherwise, they could never have yielded such fruit, they could never have sustained such beauty. This is the way of grape vines: they give life to the branches that grow out of them, stretching and spreading and sprawling until the central vine is barely visible, all but lost in the abundance it yields. The branches are extensions of the vines; when vines are strong and branches pruned, the plants bear fruit that brings sustenance and satisfaction to those who taste its sweetness.

"I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus says. "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit." Yes, it is an image of dependence, of mutuality, of intimacy. Because the ability to bear fruit relies upon a relationship with the One who gives life. Branches do not produce on their own; they *cannot* produce on their own. They are but extensions of the vine; and the harvest they yield testifies to the goodness of the life-source from which they draw their nourishment. In his final moments with his disciples, Jesus gives them a commandment and he offers them a promise. "Abide in my love," he says. *Abide in the love you have experienced in tangible ways, through bread broken and wine poured out. Abide in the love you have experienced, time and again, as I have shown you who I am. It is the love of the Good Shepherd, who cares tenderly for the flock. It is the love of the Resurrection and the Life, who calls the dead from the tomb and liberates them to the fullness of life. It is the love of the Way, the Truth, and the Life, who prepares a place for his own and gathers all into the divine embrace. Abide in me. Abide in my love.*

"And if you abide in my love," Jesus assures his disciples, "then you will bear fruit."

"If you abide in my love," Jesus promises *all who dwell in him*, "then you will produce a harvest of love and grace."

We can no longer see the True Vine — at least not as the crowds who watched Jesus working wonders. Unlike the first disciples, we did not see Jesus smear mud on the eyes of a man born blind; we did not witness Jesus stand at the mouth of the tomb and command Lazarus to come out. We did not wait on the hillside as Jesus ascended into heaven. But, the invitation to relationship endures. For, by the power of the Spirit, we have come to know what God is like. Because Christ still calls to us:

"I am the Bread of Life. Come to me and never be hungry."

"I am the Gate for the Sheep. Enter by me and be saved."

"I am the Resurrection and the Life. Believe in me and you shall live."

Yes, Christ still calls to us — inviting us to share his life, imploring us to dwell in his love: "I am the vine; you are the branches. Abide in me as I abide in you."

And if we abide faithfully — if we root ourselves in love, and draw nourishment from streams of grace — then, we will bear fruit. After all, branches are but an extension of the vine; their yield reflects the goodness of the roots from which they grow. Love embodied, enacted, imprinted on the heart of disciples: Friends, we live in a world that is craving a harvest of love and grace. Especially these days, when it feels like things are spinning out of control. Thousands are fleeing their homes and homelands — desperate to escape oppressive regimes, desperate to outrun fires or floods. Thousands are falling ill, as this pandemic rages on, while hundreds are forced to choose between ruined homes and crowded shelters. The news is relentless, and every night, we see reminders of just how broken and divided we are ... with some celebrating, others grieving the newest mandate, the latest court decision. As our world hungers for hope and yearns for the fruit of kindness and peace and generosity — I expect many are on the lookout for God. Some will search in the usual places — in sanctuaries or synagogues; many will look *anywhere* else. Some will be led by trust like a child; others will be deluded by a cynicism that good or God even exists. In a world where it so easy to experience only chaos and cruelty, they ask, "Where is God? What is God like?" And, as disciples of the Risen Christ, we will invite them to look to the branches, growing from the

vine rooted in love. And to answer the question we see in their eyes, we will offer them the fruits of the harvest faithful hearts yield:

Like the fruit of Generosity — a generosity that is on display every Sunday morning in our parking lot, as members and friends drop off cases of water, bags of clementines, dozens of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches ... so that our neighbors will have enough to eat.

Like the fruit of Hospitality — Hospitality that goes beyond mere *words* of welcome. Four years ago, this congregation partnered with two other communities of faith to resettle a refugee family from Afghanistan. We are already exploring how we can open our hearts once again.

To a world beset by chaos, we bear a witness of peace; in a climate where harshness holds sway, we offer the fruit of gentleness and compassion. As branches of the True Vine, we strive to root ourselves in love, and draw nourishment from rivers of grace. We strive to abide in the life of Christ; love embodied, enacted, imprinted on our hearts. So when the world asks, "What is God like?" — we can point to the fruit we bear and say: *Think about what makes you feel safe, what makes you feel brave, and what makes you feel loved. That's what God is like.* "Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit," Jesus says. Friends, may we abide in the love of Christ, so that we will yield a harvest of love and grace — a harvest so abundant that those who are looking for God can't help but wonder at its beauty. And perhaps, one of these late summer days, a mother wandering through the vineyard will point out a cluster of grapes to her child — so taken by the abundance of leaves and fruit that they marvel at the goodness of the vine that has brought the harvest forth. And they will get a glimpse of what God is like, and rest in the love that gives them life.

Prayers of the People – Ginger Ward

Lord, in your mercy, hear the prayers of your people in this dark time for our world. Help us to remember to abide in you and bear the fruit of your truth. Give us the strength to remember that it is through us, your people that you send your light into the world. Help us to remain in your love. Help us to remember to love each other as you have loved us.

Help us to remember that we are a branch in a big, beautiful tree that is the church universal. Being part of this body means that we are responsible to bring your light with us. We pray that we will be able to be a global collective beacon of your love.

Help us here at Westminster to remember that you have called us into the light. Remind us that we are a branch of your love in Wilmington Delaware and help us to remain in your love.

Help us to foster peace and justice in the world. You have blessed this congregation with the fruits of wisdom and influence. Help us to know how to use those gifts to make the world a safer, more just place for all of our brothers and sisters.

We pray for our nation and all nations, that we would live in peace and work to make the world a place where all people can live in your light.

We pray for the leaders of our nation and all nations. We pray especially that leaders would remember that the true mark of leadership is humility. We pray that our leaders would put aside division, and anger and the thirst for power and remember from whom all real strength comes and lead this nation back to your peace.

We pray for the sick and for the afraid. In this time there is much talk of sickness, and death, fire and flood and destruction. Help us to remember to abide in you daily. Give us the peace that comes with that abiding and the will to do what we can, where we can, whenever we can for those who are hurting. Help us to love each other as you have loved us.

Help us to remember to walk in your truth and bring comfort and love to those around us. You have told us that if we remain in you, that we are only to ask and it will be done. We ask for healing for the world. We ask for healing for all who need to be healed in body, heart and mind. We ask for hope.

Guide us, O God, by your Holy Spirit, that all of our prayers and all of our lives may serve your will and show your love; through Jesus Christ our Lord who has taught us to pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors. And, lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil for thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory forever. Amen.