In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Gospel lesson for this morning is the last of seven “I am” statements by Jesus. Many of these are well known, and well beloved. Jesus says: “I am the Bread of Life,” “I am the Light of the world,” “I am the Resurrection and the Life,” “I am the Way, the Truth and the Life,” and from last week, “I am the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep.”

In these seven “I am” statements, Jesus is giving his own answer to the question he had elsewhere put to his disciples: “who do you say that I am?” Jesus does not leave himself uninterpreted. Jesus does not leave us to our own devices to figure out who he is: he tells us. And this morning he is telling us: “I am the True Vine, ... I am the Vine, and you are the branches” (John 15:1, 5 RSV).

But precisely what it means for Jesus to be a vine, let alone “the True Vine,” might not be readily apparent. If Jesus had said, “I am a vine,” we might be able to take what he says as a mere metaphor, or some other figure of speech. But, if Jesus says, “I am the Vine,” then our response ought to be: “which vine?” Jesus says this as if it is the answer to a question, or has reference to some previous conversation. So, what is the previous conversation that Jesus here is referring to; what is the question that he is the answer to?

Here it is necessary to recognize that Holy Scripture typically assumes that we have a richer grasp of the Old Testament than we do. At the beginning of Jeremiah’s prophecy, Jeremiah is denouncing the people of God for their unfaithfulness, for turning to other gods: in short, for not living as the people of God, for not knowing God the “I am.” And the LORD’s accusation against the people of Israel was this: “How have you turned away from me and become a wild vine, for I had planted you as a vine, wholly true” (2:21, LXX). God had planted Israel as an entirely true vine. Israel was God’s true vine. God had chosen Israel from amongst the nations to be his people, he had called Israel out of Egypt, he had established priests and kings and prophets to tend this true vine. And yet, this true vine did what seems impossible: it became a wild vine, a vine not producing good fruit, but evil and wickedness.

The previous conversation that Jesus is referring to, the question that he is the answer to, is God’s whole engagement with the people of Israel, God’s
true vine. In Jesus Christ, God has replanted Israel. In Jesus Christ, God has another True Vine.

But there is another Old Testament reference here that is even more important for us not to miss. Jesus had said these words to his disciples on the night that he was to be betrayed. When Judas would come with the soldiers to capture Jesus, Jesus said to them, “Whom do you seek?” [The soldiers] answered him, ‘Jesus of Nazareth’” (John 18:4–5 RSV). Jesus responded to them by saying, “I am he.” When he said this, Judas and the soldiers “fell to the ground” (v. 6). Why did they fall to the ground at these words? If I had said those words to you, you wouldn’t fall to the ground. But in the mouth of Jesus, these words have power because of who he is.

When the L ORD called Moses to free his people from Egypt, Moses asked the L ORD, “who shall I tell them has sent me?” And God said, “I AM WHO I AM. Tell them, ‘I AM has sent me’” (Exodus 3:13–14).

So anytime that we hear Jesus say the words “I am,” our ears ought to prick up: for what comes next will be words of life or death; what comes next will be Jesus’ taking to himself the very name of the God of Israel, and therefore will either be blasphemy—something that according to the Old Testament he ought to be stoned for—or, it is Israel’s God in the flesh, it is “I AM” in the flesh, who will be the fulfillment of the hopes of Israel and of the whole world.

So when Jesus says the words, “I AM the True Vine,” there is much included in this statement. Jesus is saying two things: in Christ God has replanted Israel. The true vine that became wild is replanted in Christ, so that it might become true again. But God has replanted Israel by himself becoming the Vine. In Jesus Christ, the Planter of the vine and the Vine itself have become one. In Jesus Christ, the I Am has become the Vine.

Jesus goes on to further interpret this image for us: “I am the Vine, you are the branches. He who abides in me, and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing” (John 15:5). As a branch by itself has no source of life, so too the Christian has no source of life if he or she does not abide—remain—in Christ. “I am Life,” Jesus had earlier said. Now he shows how we have life in us, by abiding in him, remaining in him, and he in us. And as a branch receives whatever life is in the vine, so too does the Christian receive Christ’s own life into him or her. But the Life of Christ, as we have already seen, is precisely the life of the God of Israel, the life of the I AM.

Our Epistle lesson fills out this relation for us. John writes, “By this we know that we abide in [Christ] and he in us, because [Christ] has given us of his own
Spirit” (1 John 4:13). What flows from the Vine into the branches, what Christ gives to us, is his Spirit. This is put beautifully in the third verse of our final hymn today. “Jesus the Vine, we are the branches; Life in the Spirit the fruit of the Tree.”\(^1\) The Life of Jesus is given to us because Christ’s Spirit flows to us as the life of a vine flows to its branches.

The end of this verse from the hymn though is important. It continues, “Heaven to earth, Christ to the people, gift of the future now flowing to me.”\(^2\) Through Jesus’ own Spirit, Christ comes to the people, to his branches, the Church. This is the very Life of the Church: life in Christ through his Spirit flowing into us.

And so the great task of the church, the great vocation for all of us and for each of us, is not to find life, it is not to go looking for life. For those who are baptized, the task is to remain in Life by abiding in Christ. Remain in him, and you have Life. Remain in Christ, and all that is his is yours. Remain in him, and you will bear good and beautiful and true fruit. As St. John said it, “He who abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit ... By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be my disciples” (John 15:5b, 8). Remaining in Christ, being connected to the Vine, the branch cannot but bear good and pleasing fruit.

And what is the fruit that the Church bears, what is the Life that shall be lived? It is described nowhere better than in our Epistle lesson. John’s Epistle says this, “If we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us” (1 John 4:12b). The fruit of the Vine is that we, the branches, love one another. For God \textit{is} love. God is not merely \textit{loving}, he is Love itself. If he abides in us and we in him, then how could we do anything else but love one another?

This past Tuesday at the Pastor’s Booth there was a woman who asked me what I was doing. This is not an uncommon question, so I have an answer that gets right to the point. I usually say something like this: I try to respond to whatever it is that people want to say or talk about, by speaking about the only real hope that I have to give: and that is to speak to them about Jesus. Often when I say this people say okay and walk away. Sometimes people thank me for what I am doing, sometimes they sit down and start talking about their own pains and hurts. But this woman said, “can you just replace speaking about Jesus with speaking about love?” Can you just replace speaking about Jesus with speaking about love?

\(^2\) Ibid.
If love is the fruit of abiding in Christ, if we know that we are disciples by loving one another, and if God is glorified by us loving one another, can we simply replace speaking about Jesus with speaking about love? The answer is no. Emphatically, no. Jesus cannot be replaced by love. God is Love, as our Epistle lesson said, but we come to God to know what this love is. God is Love, but we let Jesus fill out what the word “love” means. To know what love is, to know what is the love that we are called to have and embody, we must let Holy Scripture fill this word with content and meaning. And the content that Scripture gives to this word “love” is Jesus himself, the True Vine who is also the “I AM.”

We start with Jesus to know what love is. When we start the other way around, we all too quickly are led astray into other notions of love. All too quickly love becomes merely an idea, or an ideal. The past century has seen more than enough movements that started with the notion of “brotherly love” or “communal love,” and ended up becoming totalitarian regimes, with those caught under them filled with fear, precisely what our Epistle lesson said love casts out.

When we let Jesus fill out the content of the word “love,” we may be surprised what it is that we find. We will find that it is a man who both forgives a woman caught in adultery, but also lets thousands depart from him because they could not receive his teachings. We will find this same man naked and bleeding and dying, even for all of those who walked away from him. We will find that it is a man who says both, “come to me all who are weary and heavy laden,” but also “Go and sin no more.” We will see that it is a man who is not averse to taking up God’s Law and making it more strict and difficult than previously imagined. In taking up the Law into his own hands, Jesus shows us the nature of God’s love. Jesus shows that it is a love that is not satisfied with anything less than real fellowship and communion and intimacy. Jesus shows that it is a truly inclusive love, but a love that includes us not in love in general, but in Jesus’ own Life and Spirit.

And so love is the fulfilling of the Law because love is living Christ’s Life, because love is Christ living in us since we have his own Spirit in us. And so we love one another, because Christ has first loved us. We love one another, not in word only, but in deed and in truth, as we heard from our epistle lesson last week. We do so, because Christ’s Life is given to us, his Spirit lives in us. And if he has given us his own life, the only proper response is to live it.

It is not coincidental or insignificant that in the first “I am” statement Jesus calls himself the Bread of Life. He immediately goes on to say that it is his
flesh that is the bread that he gives for the world to eat. As manna sustained Israel in the wilderness, Jesus’ flesh is given as bread for the world, to eat and be sustained. But in this last “I am” statement Jesus calls himself the True Vine. A vine’s life eventually flows into its branches, which produce the fruit. The fruit contains the life of the Vine in it, made sweet and pleasing. This last I am statement Jesus spoke on the night that he was betrayed. He was about to be crucified, to be crushed in the winepress of his Father’s love. And it is the fruit of this crushing, it is the fruit of God’s love for us in Christ that we gather around this Table to drink. And so we come together to eat the Bread of Life, and to drink the Fruit of Christ the Vine, receiving his Life as our own so that we might live his Life now and forever.

And so let us come, receive Jesus Christ, who is the Bread of Life and the True Vine, so that we might live Christ’s Life of Love now, and forever, so that we might love one another, as Christ has loved us, and abide in Christ, to the glory of his Father in the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.