

A Thirst for Spirituality

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



"I Am the Vine" by Jan Richardson

Prayer of Illumination

Testify to us, O God,
By the voice of your Spirit.
Put your law into our hearts,
Write your word in our minds,
Show your will in our lives.
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.

Background

The word "abide" is used nine times in John 15. "Abide" is the key word and concept in our passage. To abide means to: *commune, be connected, to dwell in, remain with, and be in union with*. Abide is a relationship word.

Jesus shares the key to Christian spirituality here when he says: I am the true vine, my Father is the vinegrower, and you are the branches. Spirituality is all interconnected and integrated with

God, Christ, and one another. It isn't a solo or solitary affair. "Apart from me," says Jesus, "you can do nothing." Abide in me, I in you. Abide also in my word, my teachings. Abide in my love. Let my life become your life.

So, stay in touch with me. Remain in constant contact. Keep talking and keep spending time in Jesus' presence. He's good company, he builds you up. And, when this happens, by the grace God, you'll become, as Psalm 1 describes it:

"... trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither."

So, let's hear the words of Christ from ...

Scripture: John 15:5-8 (NRSV)

⁵ 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.

⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

*The grass withers and the flower fades,
but the Word of God endures forever.*

SERMON – A Thirst for Spirituality

It happened at 4th and Walnut on March 18, 1958 in Louisville, Kentucky. Thomas Merton was waiting for an appointment. As he waited, he watched the hustle and bustle of busy people shopping and working. And at that busy corner, he saw a "strange sight." He had a new appointment—a meeting with God.

Merton shares about this mysterious encounter with the holy:

In Louisville, at the corner of Fourth and Walnut, in the center of the shopping district, I was suddenly overwhelmed with the realization that I loved all those people, that they were mine and I theirs, that we could not be alien to one another even though we were total strangers. It was like waking from a dream....

This sense of liberation from an illusory difference was such a relief and such a joy to me that I almost laughed out loud.... I have the immense joy of being man, a member of a race in which God Himself became incarnate.

As if the sorrows and stupidities of the human condition could overwhelm me, now I realize what we all are. And if only everybody could realize this! But it cannot be explained. There is no way of telling people that they are all walking around shining like the sun.

"Our hearts are restless," says St. Augustine, "until they find rest in Thee." Made in God's image, we've been created with a thirst for spirituality, a hunger for God. We human beings are "wired for eternity."

There is a great German word that captures this thirst and yearning for the eternal planted deep in our souls: *Sehnsucht*. *Sehnsucht* is a life-longing, wistful yearning, a bittersweet pondering upon the incompleteness and fragility of life. It's a nagging feeling of melancholy, a soul ache, that there must be something more in this life.

Sehnsucht has been described as almost a homesickness for a far-off place we've never been, that still strangely feels like home. A shy, persistent, and elusive still, small voice that tells us we're only scratching the surface. C.S. Lewis described *sehnsucht* as:

"... the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never yet visited."

Organized religion is in decline in North America, but we are as spiritual as ever. People just go to different places than church to search for spiritual encounters and *Sehnsucht*. For some it might be a mix and match, choose your own New Age spirituality:

- Some transformational breathwork,
- A metaphysical class here,
- Dabbling with wicca, tarot cards, crystals, harmonic convergence.
- And maybe a personality inventory too.

It's a designer spirituality—individualized, convenient, and low-commitment.

Other's spiritual appetite is whetted with more fringy fascinations with ghosts, extra-terrestrials, Saskwatch, or far-fetched conspiracy theories to give meaning to it all. Some seek to slake that spiritual thirst with psychedelics, political parties, or sexual conquests. For still others, it's science or rationalism that's the holy grail—hoping it will lead to that elusive fountain of youth, longevity, progress, or crystal-clear clarity to see reality as it is. I think all these searches are attempts to soothe that Soul Ache. But I think the soul's cry needs more than these things. We yearn for something deeper, much bigger than any spiritualized consumerism or scientific materialism could ever offer. We need something mysterious, but not a mere myth. We long for a real, not imagined, encounter beyond our physical needs and senses.

I like how psychologist and author Richard Beck describes these moments where we start doubting our doubts, become skeptical of our skepticism, and disenchanted with our disenchantments. But spiritual cliches and platitudes won't do either. Just because something has the label "spiritual" on it, doesn't mean it's the real deal.

People who are dying of thirst will drink just about anything, even if it's polluted. Someone starving will eat anything they can find, from grass to uncooked meat. But the Scriptures teach that God, and God alone, is the only One that can fill that God-shaped hole in our hearts. This genuine, living breathing encounter with the holy will saturate us with the meaning, wonder,

reverence, and wholeness our souls have been panting for. The good news is this spiritual connection is free. A gift. You don't have to pay thousands of dollars for an exotic retreat. But it is costly—requiring surrender and sacrifice, your very life.

*"I am the true vine," says Jesus, "and my Father is the Gardener."
"And you are the branches."*

The vine was the symbol of the nation of Israel. But in the Scriptures the vines always grew wild—resisting God's tending. Jesus was saying he was different. He was the true vine. Christian spirituality is different from all the others. It looks to Jesus first. It's not a "me-focused" spirituality, just a baptized version of self-help, self-absorption, and self-satisfaction.

Vines are a high maintenance plant—kind of like us. Vines grow like wildfire, so they have to be regularly pruned. The soil around them needs to be carefully tended. Vines grow two kinds of branches—those that bear fruit and those that never do. The fruitless branches always need to be cut off. And the wood from the vine is basically good for nothing. In the temple, wood offerings could be brought in. But the wood from the vine could not be received.

Jesus is saying we can't find God alone or inside ourselves. We're a mess and need a lot of divine help. Jesus says that he's appointed us, commissioned us to bear fruit. Much fruit. Lasting fruit. The spirituality Jesus offers isn't a fad—it's ancient and yet ever new and fresh and time-tested. And so we're chosen for this, meaning that we've been given a call to service, a vocation, a purpose to bear fruit and nourish others, as we've been nourished.

Christian spirituality isn't insular. Abundant, everlasting life comes from looking outward, rather than inward. We receive it by being connected to Christ. *"I am the vine and you are the branches."*

We human beings are a lot like roses. You can put a rose in a vase as a way to commemorate a loved one or celebrate a birth or an achievement. But we don't last long if we're severed from the rose bush. Even if we're given plenty of water. On our own, we'll soon wither and fade away.

Jesus puts it this way: Apart from me, you can do nothing. It's humbling. There's no inner god or goddess within us. Jesus goes on, *"Abide in me and I in you."* In other words: I got this. Remain with me, stay connected to the vine. Don't branch out without me. Don't go out on a limb without me. Abide.

Abide means to *dwell, commune, stay with, and remain a part of*. We often hear the word "abide" in this context:

Be a "law abiding citizen."
Don't speed. Abide by the speed limit.

So "abide" has the connotation of keeping within the established system, not coloring outside the lines. Staying in your lane. Not rocking the boat.

The “abide” Jesus is talking about doesn’t mean that. It’s a relationship word. Be present. Receptive. Open. Learn from me. Spend time in my presence. Stay, don’t stray. Continue in me and you’ll endure, you’ll weather drought, frost, and storm. I won’t leave you in the dark. I will reveal myself to you.

Christian spirituality isn’t just busy work. It’s allowing Christ to be made manifest in and through you. It’s not so much imitating Christ, as letting Christ live his life in and through you. Christ is actually operating and working in you and through you, individually and collectively as the Body of Christ. But abiding doesn’t mean passivity. God is at work in us. Like the vine, some of your branches that are barren or dead, God your Spiritual Gardener is going to clip off. They’re not doing you any good. Overgrown. Don’t worry, God knows the difference between what’s dormant and what’s dead.

So we’ve got to let some things go—selfishness, fear, bitterness, and wrath. Die to yourself. Let those things wither away. Watch them burn in a blaze of glory. You can only grow, by becoming less. Minimalize the overgrowth.

Then, Jesus says, “your good branches I’m going to prune, so you can be *even more fruitful*. I love you just as you are, but I want you to grow, to be stretched and challenged. It will be painful, even scary. Don’t worry, it will grow back—even better.” Christian spirituality is different because it’s shaped by hardship and joy. It’s resilient—both tough and tender. It involves the cross and the empty tomb. It’s joyful and life-giving, but it’s not cozy or fuzzy. You’ve got to deny yourself.

It’s also transformative. We’re matured into disciples—followers of Christ, not ourselves. And God is glorified by our life—it points to him, not to us. God our Gardener knows just what he’s doing. God prunes and purifies us. So be patient and stay connected.

Remember, it’s the vine’s fruit, not your fruit. It’s God’s fruit. Our life and fruitfulness are dependent upon the life-giving power of the vine. God gets the credit, not you. You can’t manufacture fruit, but God can manifest it in you. Make it come into fruition.

And it’s non-perishable fruit that will last. Not forbidden fruit, but fruit that will nourish many, not just yourself. This is what sets Christian spirituality apart from all others. When we dwell in Christ, his divine desires rub off on us. His character rubs off on us. What’s important to him becomes important to us. We want, what he wants. That’s what we ask for—and God grants it, happily. *Thy will be done*.

Christ is our source of life. Christ is our life. By the miracle of God, Jesus’ life is reproduced in us. Being “little christ,” we look, act, think, smell more Jesusy. This kind of spirituality leads to friendship with God, intimacy and immanence with Christ. There’s trust, openness, and attunement with the living God who created us. We can converse with Christ and listen to God through prayer.

I love the prayer of Dag Hammarskjöld, former Secretary-General of the United Nations, that asks God for:

- *A heart of humility—that we may hear Thee,*
- *A heart of love—that we may serve Thee,*
- *A heart of faith—that we may live Thee.*

We have a shared and united mind and heart with the divine. A knowing—not of facts, but a person. A relationship. Jesus took the initiative and befriended us, choosing us for this relationship of sustained fruit-bearing. Yielded to God, we yield fruit. The fruit of the Spirit miraculously manifests more and more:

Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

As fellow branches, we're connected to God and one another. Loving God, loving each other. This is the living water our soul's thirst for.

"Let anyone who is thirsty come to me," says Jesus, "and let the one who believes in me drink." For "out of the believer's heart shall flow rivers of living water."

Amen.

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