

The Branch Life  
Refocus 2018

If you are new to Highlands, or even new to church going, I want to welcome you and give you a heads up that today is a bit different from normal because we're going to begin a short series on Refocusing our Vision on why we are here.

If you're new, you'll get a behind the scenes perspective of what we are about.

You heard it during the welcome – "We are a community of believers who seek to meet people where they are and help them in their journey of becoming maturing and equipped followers of Jesus.

Each year at the start of the new "ministry year" I like to revisit some aspect of that Vision. Today will, be part sermon and part one-sided conversation from pastor to congregation. I want to share my early Christmas wish list for the folks at Highlands:

But first some insights from John 15

1 "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser. 2 Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit, He takes away; and every *branch* that bears fruit, He prunes it so that it may bear more fruit. 3 You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you. 4 Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit of itself unless it abides in the vine, so neither *can* you unless you abide in Me. 5 I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing. 6 If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away as a branch and dries up; and they gather them, and cast them into the fire and they are burned. 7 If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit, and so prove to be My disciples. 9 Just as the Father has loved Me, I have also loved you; abide in My love. 10 If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love. 11 These things I have spoken to you so that My joy may be in you, and *that* your joy may be made full.

Some thoughts on John 15

Jesus is not one to be accused of "burying the lede" - v. 1-2

Jesus wants us to know that he is The Vine and we are called to LIVE THE BRANCH LIFE.

That means

1. We bear fruit, or we are taken away, gathered, dried and cast into fire.
2. All that Jesus has is available to us if we ABIDE in Him
3. We are totally dependent on Jesus for growth

4. Fruit bearing involves a synergy between the Vine, the vinedresser, and the branches
5. The Glory of God is at stake – no small matter. Don't treat it lightly

These and other themes will be unpacked in the next few weeks.

It struck me that, **Jesus AS THE VINE**, means that he is the source of **HOW** we tap into the Bread, the Light, the Shepherd, the Resurrection the life, the Way, and the Truth.

I don't want to rephrase the series, but it is by abiding in Jesus that we experience him as all of those other things in our lives.

This is important news because our greatest needs are encompassed by those metaphors of Jesus?

When Jesus says, "you Abide in me and I in you ask whatever you wish and it will be done for you", we see the context of Abiding and bearing fruit of love and joy. As we consider what we would ask him for, at the top of the list should be that we would ask him for a reality of knowing him as bread, light, Shepherd, life, the way and the truth as we abide in him as the Vine.

That is what discipleship is all about, so as we think of growing as maturing and equipped followers of Jesus these metaphors will help us refocus on what that looks like.

What I wish for us as a congregation is that we would be people who know Jesus in the fullness of what those images reveal. That is what it means to live the Branch Life.

For starters, **I want us to know Jesus as our Bread**. That he would be the one who satisfies us. – **The ULTIMATE SNICKERS FOR THE SOUL**.



John 6:35 "Never hunger; never thirst"

When our hearts are hungry, and we are "HANGRY" and longing for some sense of fulfillment that we can't identify, I want us to know Jesus as the Bread of Life. **It only happens when we are abiding in Him.**

There is always the temptation to look to someone else, or to look inward and find our meaning in ourselves, or to look earthly things or causes to give us a sense of satisfaction. But those won't fill our hearts and they don't provide a meaning that survives beyond death. They won't forgive you or die for you. Only Jesus satisfies, but we miss out if we don't abide in Him.

"Give us this day our Daily Bread" includes feeding on Christ.

EX: Scotsman coming to America who booked passage on an ocean liner. He saved money by stocking up on crackers and cheese and fruit for his meals. Toward the end of the voyage the food got stale or spoiled so he decided to have one meal in the dining room before they got to NYC. Guess what? The price of the food was included in the ticket, but he didn't know it.

The fullness and satisfaction of the Bread of Life are included in what Jesus purchased for us, but we end up with stale crackers and rotten fruit if we don't ABIDE IN HIM.

I PRAY that we would be people who know Jesus as our LIGHT. When we are confused, wondering, and mixed up, I pray that we would turn to the Light of Christ revealed in his Word and allow that light to shine into the deepest darkest parts of our hearts and guide us so that we would walk in obedience. That leads to fullness of joy – v. 10-11

This only happens if we ABIDE IN HIM.

I pray that we would be people who know Jesus as the Good Shepherd so that when we are lost and wandering that we would find our way to him or when he comes to find us that we would hear his voice and follow him. Even if we don't think he knows where we're going, I pray we would trust him as the Good Shepherd.

Abiding in Jesus means knowing him as the Good Shepherd so that we are “casting our anxieties on Him because He cares for us” – 1 Pet 5:7

I pray that we would be a people who would draw our life and Hope in Christ as our Resurrection.

This means that our futures would be seen and be shaped by an understanding of Eternity and that an Eternal Perspective would transform how we invest ourselves in terms of our time and talent and treasure.

This only happens if we ABIDE IN HIM.

I pray that we would be people who know Jesus as the way, the truth, and the Life. That we would be willing to make the tough choices to follow his way. Jesus says narrow is the way that leads to life, but the world will offer a Broad Avenue for us to follow that leads to destruction. The branches that don't Abide are gathered up and cast into the fire.

Those that abide in Him bear fruit and know the fullness of Joy in Christ.

Living the branch life means abiding in Jesus as he has revealed himself in these “I AM” statements. Those statements are not simply given for us as theology or as talking points, they are given to us because they relate to the deepest needs and longings of our hearts, and the way to tap into that is through abiding in Jesus.

Let's put all of this into our context and Values here at Highlands.

Growth in the Branch Life looks like walking the path of the six E's.

If you've been here a while, then you've heard me preach about the Six E's, or you've seen it in the New Member Class. I regret that I don't bring them up more often.

Here is what the Branch Life produces as the branches abide in Christ and relate biblically to one another and the world.

EMBRACE – A Heart That Trusts And Treasures Christ John 15:10

EXALT – A Heart Response of Faith Toward God 15:7 – prayer is the chief expression of faith

EQUIP – Learning To Be A Disciple 15:5 A disciple is one who abides in Christ and bears fruit.

ENCOURAGE – Learning To Love Others And To Be A Part Of The Body Of Christ- 15:12

EXHIBIT – Life Changing Transformation Is Becoming Evident – 15:8 – the fruit is evident and glorifies God

EXPRESS – To Communicate The Reality Of Christ Through Word And Deed- 15:16

And it is in a community of loving relationships where we are speaking the truth to one another in love that it becomes real and fleshed out in our lives.

I did a whole series on one another and one thing that is clear is that we cannot love one another unless we are engaged and involved with one another at a level that goes beyond Sunday morning worship.

Unlike grapes in a vineyard, we don't ABIDE in Rows.

We don't love in rows.

We don't grow and connect in rows.

We need circles and face to face



Like grapes in a vineyard, we too need a structure for the grapes to flourish. But our structure will be more like circles than rows. We can't expect things to "just happen organically". It just doesn't work that way. The cells in our body are very organic, but they also have a structure. As the body of Christ, we also need a structure to help us grow.

This fall we are going to try to set in place an additional trellis for us to grow. We'll be doing the prep work for the next few weeks so that we can get the new structure functional by September 16<sup>th</sup>.

That will be one of the topics as we proceed in the next few weeks.

To make it accessible to as many as possible, we're going to build the structure into the Sunday School hour.

Come be a part this morning. The prep work begins with a six-week series called BEFRIEND.

I know that I just lost some of you, but I really encourage you to join us.

Scripture and life experience show some realities of spiritual growth:

1. We all have a part to play – We are the branches

2. There is an enemy who is against us – Wormwood and Screwtape are real

3. Growth happens in community not in isolation- There is one TRUE VINE, but many branches.

Have you ever seen one grape growing by itself?

I've been doing this "full-time Jesus" thing since 1977 working with college students, youth, and churches in France and the USA, and I've never seen a thriving fruitful believer who lived in isolation. I've seen quite a few fruitful branches move from abiding in community to living in isolation and when it happens they become unfruitful.

Let me say this with all the love and pastoral concern I can...

If your branch life mainly consists of attending worship service and some occasional quiet times, then your attachment to the Vine is minimal.

When you abide in the Vine you will also become more attached to the Branches.

You can take a first step by joining us in Sunday School. You don't even have to say anything (for the first six weeks). After that you'll be given a chance to be a part of a Branch Life hothouse – men with men and women with women.

If that idea scares you to death, then this may be the big step of faith you need to become more fruitful.

Jesus does not leave us on our own because it's clear that he is with us, is available to us, and encourages us to get His strength through abiding. Scripture is also clear that Abiding in Christ means loving one another. We can't do that unless we know each other well enough to speak truth to one another in love. That doesn't happen in rows or in isolation.

The life of the vine flows through the branches so that each branch can grow in a healthy relationship to Christ and to one another.

Think about that. AMEN

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