

The Branch Life #2  
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 earlier 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. This year, our ReFocus is centered on the passage from John 15 where Jesus gives a series of truths about the Branch Life. That term refers to our relationship with Jesus as described in John 15. We looked at it last week, but we'll pick up this week. As a reminder to those new or were out last week, in v. 5 Jesus says,

**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.**

We're going to look at the fuller context in a few minutes, but first, I want to explore the question, "What keeps us from moving forward in our spiritual journey of abiding in Jesus?"

Jesus indicates that something could interfere because he says, "IF you abide in Me and My words abide in you." The "IF" means it isn't automatic. There are things that hinder us from abiding.

I propose that it's not atheism, liberalism, conservatism, fundamentalism, secularism, communism, or consumerism. IT'S SHEILAISM.

Any one ever heard of that?

**Sheilaism is a shorthand term for an individual's system of religious belief which co-opts strands of multiple religions chosen by the individual, usually without much theological consideration.** (Wikipedia)

[http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures\\_5.htm](http://www.robertbellah.com/lectures_5.htm)

Sociologist Robert Bellah wrote a book in 1985 about American society called *Habits of the Heart*. In it, he said that radical individualism was the defining reality of American life. People were so absorbed in themselves that they saw everything in terms of how it would satisfy their personal needs or desires – the "imperial republic of self."

\*\*Note- this was before the advent of Facebook, cell phones and selfies.

In a 1986 lecture about the book and its findings Bellah said,...

Early in chapter 9 on religion in *Habits*, we describe someone we interviewed, for *Habits of the Heart*, one young woman who has named her religion after herself.

Sheila Larson is a young nurse who has received a good deal of therapy and describes her faith as "Sheilaism." This suggests the logical possibility of more than 300 million American religions, one for each of us. "

I believe in God," Sheila says. "I am not a religious fanatic. I can't remember the last time I went to church. **My faith has carried me a long way. It's Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.**"

Sheila's faith has some tenets beyond belief in God, though not many. In defining what she calls "my own Sheilaism," she said: "It's just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess,

take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other." Like many others, Sheila would be unwilling to endorse more specific points.

Bellah's larger point was that this individualism had now reached the point where American religion was becoming so individual that the religion came down to one's first name + "ism".

Keep that in mind, not just for 1985 but for 2018.

One aspect of Sheilaism today is the 85 gender classifications as defined on the website Refinery 29 where they list "Gender Sexuality terms". This is Sheilaism, or the "religion of me", taken to its logical conclusion in our own cultural age where Sexual rights and identity have taken the place of a God given identity.

*"In case you haven't heard, we're in the middle of a gender revolution. We aren't merely male or female. People are no longer confining themselves to the classification of the bodies they were born with ... That's why we've created the gender glossary. It's filled with 85 terms (and counting) defined by people who identify with the terms themselves."*

So, as with the potential of 300 million different gods in American culture, we could have 300 million different genders, or 300 million political systems, or 300 million versions of Truth, or right and wrong.

If Bellah is correct, it means that we have lived in a culture for the past 30+ years shaped by this mindset of Sheilaism.

Bellah observed it, wrote about it, and gave a name to it, but as we learned in the Ecclesiastes series, "there is nothing new under the sun." Go back to the book of JUDGES and it's "every man did that which was right in his own eyes."

If we're honest, there is some aspect of "Sheilaism" in all of us. Perhaps more that we'd care to admit.

Let's be honest and own our Sheilaism. You'll hate this, but on the count of 3 say your name + ism.

Ready 1,2,3,     your name     + "ism".

Do we recognize the degree to which that is our functional religion in day to day life?

So, how does Sheilaism hinder our BRANCH LIFE??? Listen to John 15:1-17

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.

12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

14 You are My friends if you do what I command you. 15 No longer do I call you slaves, for the slave does not know what his master is doing; but I have called you friends, for all things that I have heard from My Father I have made known to you.

16 You did not choose Me but I chose you, and appointed you that you would go and bear fruit, and *that* your fruit would remain, so that whatever you ask of the Father in My name He may give to you. 17 This I command you, that you love one another.

Who is the FOCUS of that passage? Not Sheila, not me, not you. It's Jesus.

Are we included? Sure. Where?

We are told to ABIDE, BEAR, ASK, and LOVE one another, not ourselves.

**The Branch life is the opposite of Sheilaism.**

Jesus knows that the Branch Life involves a dying to self, and He knows how we will fight the idea that continuous abiding in Him is absolutely necessary.

Sheilaism opposes abiding because it is all about "my own voice" and doing what I think is right or following MY path, ♪.doing it "MY WAY" ♪.

A similar sentiment is expressed Lady Gaga's song - "Hair"... "I've had enough, this is my prayer That I'll die livin' just as free as my hair"

**THE BRANCH LIFE is about hearing and obeying the Voice of God in the Word of Christ so that we Abide in His Love.**

The first impulse of Sheilaism is inward..."my own Sheilaism, is to just try to love yourself and be gentle with yourself. You know, I guess, take care of each other. I think God would want us to take care of each other."

The impulse of the BRANCH LIFE is to love one another.

12 "This is My commandment, that you love one another, just as I have loved you. 13 Greater love has no one than this, that one lay down his life for his friends.

John 15:7 gives a crucial insight into the BRANCH LIFE and what it means to ABIDE.

Did you hear it? "If you abide in Me and MY Words abide in YOU, ask whatever you wish, and it shall be done for you."

At first it sounds like a crazy promise from God, right? Like a genie that grants three wishes.

It's not a blank slate unconditional promise. It is very conditional.

**There are two conditions:**

**IF you abide in me**

**AND**

**My words abide in you...**

Why would God open Himself up to such an open-ended promise, even though it is conditional?

Because IF we meet the two conditions, whatever we wish or desire and ask of God will be shaped and informed by HIS WORD. As such it will be in line with God's glory and His purposes.

The real issue for us is not whether God will keep His promise, but rather we will meet the conditions set forth in v.7.

EX: ABIDING IN Christ is like getting to Lafayette.

You have to really want to come here to get here. Very few people arrive here by chance.

You just don't hear this, "We left Atlanta, Nashville, Birmingham or Knoxville, and happened to end up in Lafayette. We're only 2 hours from those sizable cities, but how many people would just happen to end up in Lafayette if they traveled between any of them. You might end up in Chattanooga, but you'd really have to try to end up in Lafayette.

So too with Abiding in Christ. **The Abiding Branch Life is intentional.**

We won't end up there by accident or by a whim, and it rarely happens in isolation. **Abiding in Christ is a group activity.** We want to help by providing some structure for connecting in community:

1: **Community groups** – 10-14 folks – mixed ages and stages in life. They will kick off August 19. Take a few weeks and visit around and then see which group, if any, you want to commit to. These groups are the first line of shepherding and care giving at Highlands. If you choose not to be in a group, then you are taking a step away from the care giving ministry of the church.

2. **C.R.O.S.S. Groups** – Beginning Sept 16<sup>th</sup> during Sunday school. They will last for 11 weeks. They are for relational transformation, not information. They are 3-5 men with me or women with women. There's no homework per se, but these groups are designed to promote more connection, growth, and accountability. I like to think of them as a BRANCH LIFE HOTOHOUSE. Join us in SS today and you can indicate your interest in being a part of a group.

Those were NOT announcements. Those groups will be a vital part of creating a disciple making culture here at Highlands.

Do we want to see growth and change in our lives? It comes in community, not isolation. It comes as we Abide in Christ and His Word abides in us.

Let's think about something. Abiding in Christ really is something that we would expect to happen organically, if we are truly born of the Holy Spirit. It would seem to be the normal reality and normal flow of life – FROM THE VINE TO THE BRANCHES.

**The Holy Spirit in the Branches is in Organic connection with the Holy Spirit in the Vine.** One thing we can do is to stay connected, but that means we must put "Sheila to death" and keep our hearts in the Love of the Father.

Don't lose sight of why Jesus has called and sent us – that our joy would be made full, and that we would bear much fruit. THAT'S A WIN-WIN for us because Jesus took the loss for us.

He lost the Father's smile; He was cut off. THE TRUE VINE got the punishment of the corrupt vine described in Isaiah 5. Because of that, we get to come and share the cup provided by Jesus, the True Vine.

**The Lord's Table shows the depth of Jesus' love for you.** But it is also a table that requires an examination before you come.

Are you united to the True Vine by faith? Then come to His Table because this is a means of grace  
Scripture guides us as we approach the Table

**1 Corinthians 11:23–29 (ESV)**

As we consider those words let's bow our hearts in a time of reflection asking the Holy Spirit to show us if there is any sin we need to confess. Feel free to lead in prayer out loud if you like. If you're new just understand that corporate prayer and corporate confession has been a part of church life for 2000 years.

Close time of prayer/confession – Words of Institution of Bread and Cup

We can enjoy the cup of the Lord now, but as we do remember the day to which it points...

<https://www.refinery29.com/lgbtq-definitions-gender-sexuality-terms>

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