



The Lord is In You

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I begin my message by inviting you to be open to your own beautiful center of wisdom, which lives deep within your soul. Do you believe that it's there, your personal connection to wisdom, which is the Lord who lives and moves and has his being within you? I believe it's there, and I invite you to be deeply in tune with it right now. See if what you're about to hear feels like the truth for you. If it does, then I rejoice in that. If my words do not connect for you, then I hope you will trust yourself not to digest them.

In this church, we each are called to search out and find the truth that is sensible and meaningful, that is as tasty as grapes from a vine and therefore nourishing and digestible. I pray that my message will help you in some significant way.

God is inside of everyone. This is a given. God's gracious nature is to live inside of every person, no matter how good or evil. As Swedenborg noted, this is more than an act of love on God's part; it's a necessity to sustain our life. For we each are created beings. The Lord is Life Itself, self-sustaining Life. This is why Paul Tillich spoke of God as being the very "ground of being." One of the blessings of this, my friends, is that in order for anyone simply to live, she must have God within her, for the physical body is actually sustained and vivified by the presence and life-force of the human soul, and the soul receives its life from God.

But the spiritual reality of life doesn't end there. Since the Lord's Word declares that God is Love, we therefore can open ourselves to yet another life-altering truth, which is something so precious, so amazing, that it will take an eternity for each of us to understand what it means that a God like this dwells within us. It means that you are being loved by Love Itself, not only from the outside in but also from the "inside out!" God is cherishing you from within the inward parts of your being. And you don't have to work for this. It's a given. And that is exactly what we're faced with, my friends: God loves you! Intimately. Tenderly. Personally. With deep mercy and understanding.

There is an intentional, conscious loving and caring for you happening down in the depths of your heart and your soul, such that the Lord is able to see and know you totally, even more than you know yourself, and is helping you intimately and ever so wisely with your inner struggles, your hurts, your fears, your misunderstandings, your doubts, everything that troubles you. This is all part of the "good news" in God's Word, in the Bible. It's saying, in short, that the Lord lives within you and that He has a fundamental role in our lives as our constant, ever-present source of life's most important

ingredients. His presence literally creates internal happiness, peace, faith, and a deepening desire to love others—just because! In Genesis we read of the story of the Garden of Eden and about the Tree of Life living in the center of that paradisiacal garden.

Today we're blessed to reflect upon another angle of this image of the indwelling God, which is God as the Divine Vine of life. In it we hear God incarnate, our Lord Jesus Christ, saying simply, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me."

So, the simple yet powerful question I want to ask you today is, are you in the Lord?

1. Do you believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Divine Human, and do you hear His words as truth that give you life and set you free?
2. Will you seriously and hopefully ingraft yourself to the truth that you are cherished by Jesus, and will you try every day to love others as Jesus loves you?
3. Will you bear the fruits of love and just enjoy and be passionate about your own personal and unique ability to make use of this spiritual relationship you're blessed with as a Christian? This is what the Lord meant, I believe, by saying that we must "remain in Him," as He also resides in you.

Donald Grey Barnhouse cites an amazing example of lasting fruitfulness. In Hampton Court, near London, there is a grapevine under glass; it is about a thousand years old and has but one root, which is at least two feet thick. Some of the branches are two hundred feet long. Because of skillful cutting and pruning, the vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even though some of the smaller branches are two hundred feet from the main stem, they bear much fruit because they are joined to the vine and allow the life of the vine to flow through them. God gives us many awesome graces or powers in life—to be sure, we're each inherently powerful creatures. One of the greatest of these is the power within you, which God gives to you, to learn about the Lord and to read His thoughts in the Bible and to believe that Jesus is the Son of God—or rather, God with us in glorified human form.

This power of spiritual understanding, you might say, prospers as individual strands of faith and understanding combine into an ever-growing stalk of life perception. Each strand may consist of a

person's coming to see and know things that deal with spiritual life, such as the nature of God, the Incarnation, how the Lord accomplished redemption, what true charity is, the journey of spiritual regeneration throughout life, concepts and insights about life after death, and so on and so on. Each of these individual strands of faith ultimately joins together into a growing stalk of faith within you, which joins into the Lord as the Divine Vine.

But the Lord is simply reminding us in John's gospel that such growing and living faith comes to us as a choice—and it's an enormously relevant choice indeed. If we open our ears to hear the truth of this lesson this morning, it reveals a fundamental relationship between us and the Lord God: that if we want to be open to real love and spiritual goodness, then Jesus Christ is the One we depend upon to nourish our spirits with love and empower us to bear fruit or works of love that will last. As the Lord said, "Apart from me you can do nothing. Remain in me, and I will remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me. This is to My Father's glory that you bear much fruit. As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Remain in my love."

Author and speaker Brennan Manning came up with a slogan: "I am the one Jesus loves." It sounds a little arrogant, doesn't it? But he is actually quoting Scripture. Jesus' closest friend on earth, the disciple named John, is identified in the gospels as "the one Jesus loved." Manning said, "If John were to be asked, 'What is your primary identity in life?' he would not reply, 'I am a disciple, an apostle, an evangelist, an author of one of the four Gospels,' but rather, 'I am the one Jesus loves.'"

What would it mean, I ask myself, if I too came to the place where I saw my primary identity in life as "the one Jesus loves"? How differently would I view myself at the end of a day? Sociologists have a theory of the looking-glass self: you become what the most important person in your life (wife, father, boss, et cetera) thinks you are. How would my life change if I truly believed the Bible's astounding words about God's love for me, if I looked in the mirror and saw what God sees?

Manning tells the story of an Irish priest who, on a walking tour of a rural parish, sees an old peasant kneeling by the side of the road, praying. Impressed, the priest says to the man, "You must be very close to God." The peasant looks up from his prayers, thinks a moment, and then smiles, "Yes, he's very fond of me." This fundamental and transforming truth of the Lord's love for you is a core part of the Christian faith. Jesus said, "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in

my love.”¹ But then God’s love in us moves up and out and functions so as to bear fruit that contains this love within it, which is why life in Christ is called “heaven.” In a beautiful sermon entitled “The Power of Love,” Paul Tillich, one of the great theological minds of the twentieth century, writes of a Swedish woman who aided prisoners and orphans during World War One. She ended up in a concentration camp herself because she gave aid and comfort. Tillich writes, “It is a rare gift to meet a human being in whom love— this means God—is so overwhelmingly manifest. It undercuts theological arrogance as well as pious isolation. It is more than justice and greater than faith or hope. It is the very presence of God in the form of a human being. For God is love. In every moment of genuine love we are dwelling in God and God in us.”²

There are other sorts of vines we can choose to graft ourselves onto—we know them as thistles and brambles. There are noxious ideas and belief systems that will give us the juice to bear sour fruit and that can make us rather “prickly” to others trying to get close to us. Are you sometimes too thorny to the approach of others? Only those Christians who personally choose to be spiritually ingrafted to Christ will be able to let go of the selfish inclinations that can ultimately strangle the life in our hearts and minds with noxious brambles, thorns, and choking weeds.

A story is told of a farmer who said that years ago a thunderstorm swept through southern Kentucky at the farm where his Claypool forebears had lived for six generations. The old farmer recounts this poignant tale: “In the orchard, the wind blew over an old pear tree that had been there as long as anybody could remember. My grandfather was grieved to lose the tree on which he had climbed as a boy and whose fruit he had eaten all his life.” “A neighbor boy came by and said, ‘Doc, I’m really sorry to see your pear tree get blown down.’ ‘I’m sorry, too,’ said my grandfather. ‘It was a real part of my past.’ ‘‘What are you going to do?’ the neighbor boy asked. ‘The grandfather paused for a moment and then said, ‘I’m going to pick the fruit and burn what is left.’” That is the wise way to deal with certain things in our past. We need to learn their lessons, enjoy their pleasures, and go on with the present and the future.

¹ New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

² Tillich, Paul. *The Shaking of the Foundations*. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2011.

Christ is the Vine, and we are the branches. And when we need pruning, the goal is always more fruit. The Lord Jesus Christ is in you. Are you in the Lord? The Lord gives us His powerful commandment: “Love one another.”

Amen.