

# Remain in Me

John 15:1-17

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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This summer we're going to be talking about peace.

For the next seven Sundays that we gather—from today until the Labour Day weekend, with the exception of August 6, when there is no service—we're going to be drawing from a worship series called "Seeking Peace Together."

Now, I don't know if this fills your heart with anticipation and excitement or with dread or with a bored yawn. I suspect all three of these responses might be present in the room.

"Peace" is a word that provokes different reactions in different people, maybe particularly in the Mennonite world where our historical commitments to pacifism or nonviolence run deep, but where we also, if we're honest, at least occasionally feel *somewhat* conflicted about it.

I want to begin with a caveat or a confession. I've said something like this before, but I feel I need to say it again, particularly as we step into a summer series on "peace."

I long for peace. I long for world peace, for peace in my relationships, for inner peace, for peace with God. I long for these things deep in my bones.

But, like all good things that we long for, I think we can often and easily distort things.

Too often, particularly in more progressive corners of the church, "peace" can become a "position" we hold. It's an expression of our brand, our politics, our ethics, our convictions about social justice.

And it can take the place of God, particularly in a secular and skeptical context. It's way more socially acceptable to talk about "peace" than about "God."

Peace can, in other words—like so many other things—become an idol.

So, at the outset of our summer series I want to name a crucially important distinction and to ask us to keep it in front of us for the rest of the summer and for the rest of our lives.

For many—even many well-meaning Christians—peace is the goal and Jesus is the way to get there. Jesus is the instruction manual to achieving peace. Jesus becomes a means to an end.

This is backwards.

Instead, for the Christian, Jesus is the goal, and peace is the fruit, or the gracious gift of a life lived in devotion to him.

I am convinced that this is a distinction that matters deeply.

Jesus is *always* the end, *never* the means. We must remember this in any of our reflections on peace, whether in a summer sermon series or in the life of discipleship more generally.

A quick note about the road map ahead. The worship resources we are drawing from have thirteen Sundays worth of material. We do not (at least not in summer).

So, the worship committee granted me the freedom to pick and choose from the resources.

The resources divided the Sundays into four roughly equal categories.

Peace with God.

Peace within.

Peace with others.

Peace with creation.

I decided to spend most of the summer in the third category. Peace with others. This is not because I don't think the other three categories are important. I do.

But peace with others seemed to be the pressing need of the moment, in our world, in our culture, and in our church.

How do we live well with one another in these hyper-polarized times? How can we live at peace with people we don't agree with, people who annoy and frustrate us? People who hurt us?

How can we be people of peace in a context that trains us to focus on differences and to locate these as central pieces of our identity?

Also, I decided to focus on Scriptures that I don't often preach on. So, other than this morning, we're going to be spending the entire Sunday in the Old Testament. Again, this might delight, horrify, or bore you. I don't know.

I will say that we will be looking at some stories that we don't often hear in church. Stories, at the very least, that I have not preached on here at Lethbridge Mennonite Church. Stories that I think are just interesting and that open up all kinds of interesting questions about how we might become more peaceable people in our everyday relationships.

So, that's kind of the lay of the land, the introduction for the series.

As I said, we're in the OT for every Sunday *except* today. Today, we're in John 15 where Jesus talks about the vine and the branches.

I decided to start with this one for the very reasons that I began with. The order matters. Jesus is not a means but the end.

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I don't know if this is the case for you or not, but it seems to me that our calendars—whether it's the secular calendar that governs most of our lives or the Christian calendar that orders time according to the story of Jesus—give us periodic opportunities to take stock of our lives.

For some it's the rolling over of another year. Many people take the swapping of one number for another to kind of re-evaluate, to make (and usually break) New Year's resolutions.

For others, it's the beginning of a new academic year. This feels like a fresh start on a new sheet of paper for many.

In the Christian calendars, the seasons of Lent and Advent serve as preparatory seasons (for the coming of Christ and for his death and resurrection). These can be seasons of clear-eyed honesty, of penitence, and hopefully, of course correction.

These are the most obvious options for taking stock. But for others, it can simply be some time away from the rhythms of everyday life.

A retreat. Or a vacation. A time away from the ordinary pressures that can take over our lives.

Before I went away for a short holiday at the beginning of July, I began to read a book by Yale theologian Miroslav Volf and two of his colleagues (Matthew Croasmun and Ryan McAnnnally-Linz).

The book is called *Life Worth Living* and is taken from the title of a course that they co-teach at Yale. It is one of the most in-demand courses in the school. Many students describe it as “life changing.”

It is, essentially, a course on human flourishing. What is a good life? How should we live? What is true? What is right and good and beautiful? What, ultimately, should we give ourselves to in our handful of decades on the planet?

It is a “taking stock” kind of course.

At the end of the introduction (ominously titled, “This Book Might Wreck Your Life”), the authors provide a kind of checklist for this “taking stock.”

It comes in the form of a series of questions to ask about our lives. Something like a “life audit.”

Questions about our physical health.

- How is my body?
- What are my dominant emotions?
- What thoughts have been occupying my mind?

Questions about how we use our time.

- What is your daily schedule like?
- What events appear weekly, monthly, yearly?

- How much time is unscheduled?
- What time do you give yourself for rest? Social connection? Spiritual practice?

Questions about money (now it's getting real!)

- What are your largest regular expenses?
- Who do you spend money on?
- What do you splurge on?
- To what sorts of organizations do you donate?

Questions about attention (this was squirmiest one for me)

- What's the first thing you listen to, read or consider when you wake up? What websites do you frequent?
- Which apps on your phone do you use most frequently?
- Whose voices and opinions are most present to you? (Consider newspaper columnists, TV, podcast, or radio hosts; the people you follow on social media.) What are they saying?
- What's the last thing you listen to, read, or consider before you go to bed?<sup>1</sup>

As I read this set of “taking stock questions,” the first thing that occurred to me was how infrequently I ask these kinds of questions!

I doubt I am alone when I say that I find it relatively easy to just go into unreflective autopilot.

You get up, you do the things you've always done, you rinse, you repeat. It's remarkably easy to be remarkably unreflective in how we live, isn't it?

And yet, these are important questions to honestly ask. If we don't at least periodically consider them, we will very easily find ourselves defaulting to the dictates of consumerism, capitalism, individualism, and the edicts of the attention economy that is always seeking to lead our eyeballs around on the internet.

We will live lives that are far less than the flourishing we were created for.

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<sup>1</sup> Miroslav Volf, Matthew Croasmun, Ryan McAnnally-Linz, *Life Worth Living: A Guide to What Matters Most* (The Open Field, 2023), xxxii-xxxiii.

Another way to come at questions like these would be to ask, from what or from whom are we drawing and deriving our life?

Where are we sinking down are roots? What or who is nourishing our lives?

This is the point of Jesus' discourse on the vine and the branches.

These words come not from the cool detachment of a university classroom but from a moment on the precipice of a crisis, from the calm before the storm.

They are taken from the Farewell Discourse; the last words Jesus speaks to his disciples before his arrest in John's gospel.

I am the vine, you are the branches, Jesus says. The branch cannot bear fruit unless it is connected to the vine.

This is the seventh "I Am" statement in the book of John.

- I Am The Bread Of Life (John 6:35)
- I Am The Light Of The World (John 8:12)
- I Am The Gate For The Sheep (John 10:7)
- I Am The Good Shepherd (John 10:11)
- I Am The Resurrection And The Life (John 11:25)
- I Am The Way The Truth And The Life (John 14:6)
- I Am The True Vine (John 15:1)

Seven metaphors reinforcing one simple truth. Jesus is one and the same as the God who made heaven and earth, the liberating God who identified himself to Moses in the wilderness as "I am who I am."

This last metaphor is an agrarian or organic one. If the branch is disconnected from the vine, it becomes useless, discardable, flammable.

Jesus says to his disciples, "Remain in me, remain in my love." Remain, remain, remain. It's like the pounding heartbeat of this passage.

Some translations use the word "abide" (NRSV, for example).

I'm not typically one for including word studies in my sermons. I don't want to bore you with a bunch of technical information.

But in this case, the Greek word has a quite rich and fascinating range of meanings.

It can mean to "accept or act in accordance with." It can mean, "to not depart" or "to continue to be present." It can mean "to last" or "to endure."

It can mean "to continue to be present" or "to wait for." It can mean "to be held, kept."

Each one of these definitions communicates something about how we are to orient ourselves to Jesus and to the love he has shown us.

But as I said I like the word "remain," particularly in our context where so many have walked away from or are walking away from the church.

Remain. Continue. Keep going. Don't give up. Hang around. Don't walk away.

Continue to keep company with Jesus. With his stories. With his teachings. With his example. With his upside-down kingdom that trains us in a whole new way of valuing people and things. With his cross.

If we remain in Jesus, Jesus calls us not faithful servants or diligent pupils or good apprentices. He calls us his friends.

Have you ever thought of yourself as a friend of Jesus?

I could be wrong, but my suspicion is that many of us do not instinctively think of our identity or our faith or our relationship to God in these terms.

Lord, maybe. Master, Teacher, Saviour, King, Shepherd... yes, to all of the above.

But friend?

It feels... familiar, intimate, personal. And many of us are not used to thinking about God or about the life of faith in this way.

But one thing a good friend does is remain. Hang around. Refuse to walk away. Continue to be present.

Love.

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Love is where Jesus ends up in our text today.

My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you. Greater love has no one than this: to lay down one's life for one's friends... I am giving you these commands so that you may love one another (John 15:12-13, 17).

The friends of Jesus love as Jesus loves.

Debie Thomas sums up our role in this friendship beautifully in her reflection on this metaphor of the vine and the branches (she uses the word "abide" rather than "remain," but I'll use them both:

So what can I do? Where must I begin? Jesus offers a single, straightforward answer: "[*Remain*] abide in my love"... Jesus extends the metaphor of the vine and branches and calls us once again to [remain]/abide. To rest, to cling, to make ourselves at home. Not simply in him, but in his love.

My problem is that I often treat Jesus as a role model, and then despair when I can't live up to his high standards. But [remaining] or abiding in something is not the same as emulating it. In the vine-and-branches metaphor, **Jesus's love is not our example; it's our source. It's where our love originates and deepens. Where it replenishes itself. In other words, if we don't [remain]/abide, we can't love.**

Jesus's commandment to us is not that we wear ourselves out, trying to conjure love from our own easily depleted resources. Rather, it's that we [remain]/abide in the holy place where divine love becomes possible. *That we make our home* in Jesus's love—the most abundant and inexhaustible love in existence.<sup>2</sup>

This is the task of the church. This is our heartbeat, our core identity. A community of people who demonstrate that they are the friends of God by loving as God loves.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/lectionary-essays/current-essay?id=3003>



This is our starting point (and our ending point) in any meaningful conversation about becoming people of peace and living at peace with one another.

I don't know if you done anything like a life audit recently or not. I don't know if this is something you've even thought about.

But I believe that we all need to take stock from time to time.

My prayer is that we would indeed remain in Christ. That we would make our home in his love. That we would sink our roots down deep in the vine that produces fruit.

And in so doing, may we become people of peace.

Amen.

