Vitality and Viability Study Committee Bible Study #4
Renewal of Relationships – John 15
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Overview & Context

The Gospel of John holds a unique place next to the synoptic gospels of Mark, Matthew, and Luke. It is the gospel likely written last, thought to be completed no later than 100 CE. Upon reading it we discover the recounting of three years of Jesus’ ministry as opposed to one year, three different Passover feasts celebrated (John 2:13; 6:4; 11:55) as opposed to one during Jesus’ final days in the Synoptics. Jesus’ ministry in John alternates between Galilee and Jerusalem as opposed to being primarily grounded in Galilee in the Synoptics.1 The New Interpreter’s Bible Commentary, Volume IX reminds us that “the Gospel of John is characterized by a literary style that interweaves narrative, dialogue, and discourse to create lengthy drama-like scenes (e.g., 4:4-42; 6:1-69; 9:1-10:21; 11:1-44).”2 John 15, specifically our focus for this bible study, is important in that it is part the “centerpiece of Jesus’ teaching” in John, a part of the “Farewell Discourse and Prayer (John 14-17), a speech of unparalleled length compared with any of the gospels.”3 In John’s gospel theologically, the incarnation is central. This is expressed from the beginning with John’s discussion of “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God” (1:1) and “the Word became flesh and lived among us” (1:14). John makes clear “Jesus provides access to God in ways never before thought possible, because Jesus’ revelation of God derives from the most intimate relation with God.”4 This becomes particularly relevant as we specifically explore John 15 further, and how the imagery and conversation there intimately link God to Christ to humanity in a link of knowing and being called to love. The authorship of the gospel of John is thought to be anonymous by scholars. Although “The Gospel According to John appears as the heading of second-century CE manuscripts, likely here referring to John, the son of Zebedee to give apostolic authorship to the gospel then, there was much debate about authorship in the second and third centuries” and no clear evidence proving who actually wrote the text.5

John 15: An Invitation to the renewal of relationships & a recommitment to our heritage

To begin, this passage uses the meaningful metaphor of vines, branches, and the vinegrower to speak to the intimate way God, Christ and we as God’s people are all connected in relationship with one another. Charles Cousar, in Texts for Preaching, A Lectionary Commentary based on the NRSV - Year B reminds us that “the historical character of the imagery must not be lost. The Old Testament is full of texts where Israel is referred to as God’s special vine, often texts of admonition because of Israel’s failure to fulfill its calling. Thus, the imagery carried the notion of corporateness. The command to ‘abide’ in the first instance is directed to the church, whose

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3 Ibid, p. 494.
5 Ibid, p. 498.

2018 Annual Conference Minutes, “Vitality and Viability,” 263-265
communal life and ministries of social justice are no more than branches to be tossed into the 
fire, apart from the indwelling Christ. This is a powerful theological statement and specific 
calling that makes sense for our Anabaptist/Radical Pietist tradition. The call of John’s gospel 
and Cousar’s commentary affirm that we are to have a personal relationship with God, to dwell 
in God as individuals and the church, as preparation to then serve the world. The work of social 
justice flows and grows out of the commitment to and work of dwelling in God. Abiding in 
Christ, through any number of practices, including our foundational traditions of prayer, worship 
and bible study, is critical to be partnered with action or service in the world. Spiritual practices 
make the soil of faith rich and fertile to be about that work. Jesus immediately makes clear in this 
passage that the Christ spirit intimately and intricately abides in us, and we are invited ultimately 
to abide in Christ (John 15:4-5). Spiritual practices, then, help us to get in touch with the Christ 
that is already in us. We are created to be in connected, interwoven relationship with Christ and 
one another. And God, the vinegrower, is tending it all. In this sense, Creator and creature are 
bound together and finely woven to nourish one another and in doing so, become incredibly 
“green” or fruit bearing for the sake of the larger world. Jesus shares about the intimacy and 
depth of possibility for healing and goodness in each of us and the larger world so that we may 
know joy (John 15:11). He lets us know that the way of this intimacy, the way to this joy, the 
way to healing and wholeness individually and communally, ultimately has to do with love. Love 
is what God nourishes us with. It is the key holy nutrient for the soil of our lives. Jesus as the 
greatest revelation of God is focused most prominently on demonstrating that love, so that our 
lives would be enriched by it, abide in it, making us disciples then, as we discover, embrace, and 
go to pollinate others with this love. (John 9,10,12)

It is because of this holy love that Jesus now calls the disciples friends. His words name the new 
intimacy of their relationship together. They are no longer servants, but equal partners with Jesus 
now in this chain of love that began with God and has now moved through Jesus and into the 
disciples for even further sharing out into the world. Inundated with the Christ spirit, the essence 
of love, as we abide in that love, we become the next incarnation of love in the world. Just as 
Mary was a vessel of God’s love carrying Jesus and birthing him into the world, and Jesus has 
been a vessel of God’s love, bringing and birthing it into the lives of His followers, so, too, each 
generation of Followers is to be that vessel, another example or model bringing that goodness 
and mercy into the lives of all we meet. It is the ultimate act of service to bear this fruit, this 
unconditional love into the lives of others and so spread it further across the globe. A love that is 
not only for immediate friends, but for strangers and even enemies. A love that is for all. No 
exception. When it comes to love, there are no “buts” with God. God is Love. Christ has shown 
and nourished us with this love. To be intimate friends of and with Christ is to be the next 
generation of Love bearers. It is the sweetest, most filling and satisfying fruit that exists and can 
be nurtured and shared.

This kind of incarnational understanding of God and Christ and each of us as carriers and bearers 
of love fits perfectly with John’s incarnational theology and Brethren heritage and values. All 
who desire to be in relationship with God the vinegrower, and connected with the vine of Christ

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6 Cousar, Charles. Texts for preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year B. Louisville, KY: 
Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, pp. 314-315
as intimate friend, must seek out practices that help one abide in love, for the sake of loving in the fuller Christian community and serving the wider world through birthing practical acts of that love, globally. Abiding in Christ, practicing prayer to discover a love to be shared through practical service, is a key path to glorifying God, and healing or saving the world. Through this way of living, John 15 becomes the ultimate way, for the glory of God, and for our neighbors’ good.

Speaking even further to the work of the Vitality and Viability Study Committee with regard to the renewal of relationships, John chapter 15 invites us to recognize that to revitalize and renew relationships – our relationship with God, Christ, others, and ultimately all creation – means to do whatever we need to do to more deeply abide in Christ. This is the pathway to rediscover the fullness of Love, the call to Love, to experiencing a renewed desire to love, and so the ability to more deeply love through our encounters daily with all creation, both those in the church and persons and pieces beyond it. Discovering prayer practices as individuals and communities of faith that carry us deeper into the heart of God, can lead to coming out with more heart, more Christ-like love to extend into the world in ways that transform, renew, heal, and so bring the kingdom more fully at hand. In a world, particularly in the United States of America, where politics and the corporate world continue to show and grow a lack of respect for and even the dehumanization of each other as human beings, only further encouraging a lack of understanding about or commitment particularly to marginalized groups such as the poor, people of color and women, and where these views and ways of being continue to permeate and erode the character and calling of God’s church, a study of John 15 and recommitment to abide in Christ is critical for the renewal of the church and furthering of God’s way of incarnational love.

Questions for Reflection

- Reflect on your understanding of the connection between the vinegrower, vine and branches. Are there words that describe it for you? Does an image come to mind?
- What does it mean for you as an individual and/or for the church as a community to “abide in Christ”? What practices have you participated in to work at this? Take some time to name practices you know of. Imagine new ones you might create and try.
- How does abiding in Christ, what that can do in us and bring forth from us connect with our Church of the Brethren/Anabaptist Pietist heritage and/or values? What could it mean for places of brokenness in the world between persons, races, ethnicities, genders, humans and other living parts of creation?
- Is a renewed commitment to get in touch with (abide in) Christ’s love necessary for the health of our shared relationships as members together of congregations? For our health as community in the larger denomination? For healing and wholeness across all creation? Why or why not?