

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

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

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

31 To begin, this passage uses the meaningful metaphor of vines, branches, and the vinegrower to
32 speak to the intimate way God, Christ and we as God’s people are all connected in relationship
33 with one another. Charles Cousar, in *Texts for Preaching, A lectionary Commentary based on*
34 *the NRSV - Year B* reminds us that “the historical character of the imagery must not be lost. The
35 Old Testament is full of texts where Israel is referred to as God’s special vine, often texts of

¹ O’Day, Gail R. *The New Interpreter’s Bible: A commentary in twelve volumes Volume IX.* Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1991, p. 493.

² *Ibid*, p.p. 493-494.

³ *ibid*, p. 494.

⁴ *Ibid*, p. 495.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 498.

1 admonition because of Israel's failure to fulfill its calling. Thus, the imagery carried the notion of
2 corporateness. The command to "abide" in the first instance is directed to the church, whose
3 communal life and ministries of social justice are no more than branches to be tossed into the
4 fire, apart from the indwelling Christ."⁶ This is a powerful theological statement and specific
5 calling that makes sense for our Anabaptist/Radical Pietist tradition. The call of John's gospel
6 and Cousar's commentary affirm that we are to have a personal relationship with God, to dwell
7 in God as individuals and the church, as preparation to then serve the world. The work of social
8 justice flows and grows out of the commitment to and work of dwelling in God. Abiding in
9 Christ, through any number of practices, including our foundational traditions of prayer,
10 worship and bible study, is critical to be partnered with action or service in the world. Spiritual
11 practices make the soil of faith rich and fertile to be about that work. Jesus immediately makes
12 clear in this passage that the Christ spirit intimately and intricately abides in us, and we are
13 invited and ultimately to abide in Christ (John 15:4-5). Spiritual practices then, help us to get in
14 touch with the Christ that is already in us. We are created to be in connected, interwoven
15 relationship with Christ and one another. And God, the vinegrower, is tending it all. In this
16 sense, Creator and creature are bound together and finely woven to nourish one another and in
17 doing so, become incredibly "green" or fruit bearing for the sake of the larger world. Jesus
18 shares about the intimacy and depth of possibility for healing and goodness in each of us and
19 the larger world so that we may know joy (John 15:11). He lets us know that the way of this
20 intimacy, the way to this joy, the way to healing and wholeness individually and communally,
21 ultimately has to do with *love*. Love is what God nourishes us with. It is the key holy nutrient for
22 the soil of our lives. Jesus as the greatest revelation of God is focused most prominently on
23 demonstrating that love, so that our lives would be enriched by it, abide in it, making us
24 disciples then, as we discover, embrace, and go to pollinate others with this love. (John 9,10,12)

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

⁶ Cousar, Charles. Texts for preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV - Year B. Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993, p. p. 314-315

1 This kind of incarnational understanding of God and Christ, and each of us as carriers and
2 bearers of love fits perfectly with John’s incarnational theology and Brethren heritage and
3 values. All who desire to be in relationship with God the vinegrower, and connected with the
4 vine of Christ as intimate friend, must seek out practices that help one abide in love, for the
5 sake of loving in the fuller Christian community and serving the wider world through birthing
6 practical acts of that love, globally. Abiding in Christ, practicing prayer to discover a love to be
7 shared through practical service, is key path to glorifying God, and healing or saving the world.
8 Through this way of living, John 15 becomes the ultimate way, *for the glory of God, and for our*
9 *neighbors’ good.*

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

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28 **Questions for Reflection**

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