

## The Source of Life

Readings: Acts 8:26-40 & John 15:1-8

I'm going to talk about something that's a bit unusual for a sermon: marketing and consumer identity and how they try to trick you. And I'm going to set you a task for after church. Next time you're watching TV watch the ad breaks and count how many ads you watch that spend little time talking about the actual merits and features of their product and instead focus on tying their brand to a particular emotion. Bonus points for if they don't say anything at all about the product. Coca-Cola is notorious for this.

*Play Coca-Cola Brotherly Love ad.*

Coke: the drink of brotherly love! Notice how it didn't tell you anything about the taste of the drink. It's just there in this story of a big brother who playfully picks on his little brother but sticks up for him against the neighbourhood bullies. Why do they do this? After all, isn't advertising supposed to convince of the merits of the product? Well, this particular example is sometimes called lifestyle marketing. The idea behind it is to sell you the product by linking it to an emotion that you are either already familiar with or desire to have. In this case, when I scrolled down the YouTube comments I saw plenty of people reminiscing about times spent picking on the younger brother or people saying how much they missed their brother. Bingo! Coca-Cola has successfully linked their product with a positive emotion. This also happens in cross promotions when everything from cans of soft drinks to vegetables when they emblazon their packaging with images of superheroes and Jedi knights from the latest blockbuster film. The idea is to link your excitement you felt about the film with their consumer product. This is a phenomenon that Peter Coffin refers to in his book *Custom Reality and You* as "cultivated identity". He defines this as "the phenomenon of capital interests pushing people to incorporate enjoyment of a thing one likes into one's identity. This is intended to continue in an ever-increasing capacity with the intention of extracting more and more value through consumption".<sup>[1]</sup> That's a bit of a mouthful but essentially what he is saying is that it's the phenomenon of marketers encouraging people to associate their product with their personal identities and to derive personal value from consuming it. Don't believe me? Go up to a guy wearing a Holden t-shirt and cap and tell him that Holdens are pieces of junk and that Fords are a vastly superior car. Or consider the fact that every two years Apple releases a new iPhone in a press conference that has a creepily out of place megachurch vibe to it and for the next few days all people can talk about is how they NEED to upgrade their iPhone 8 to the iPhone 9. Why? Because Apple has capitalised on the iPhone as a status symbol and people's fear of missing out.

And this feeling of linking your identity, your enjoyment, your value to consuming a product is an incredibly powerful drug.

Coffin writes: “Marketing doesn’t ask us to consume in a healthy way. In fact, the goal is that we will consume as much as possible, which depending on the tactics used, can easily exploit the vulnerable or naïve. Most people are (at the very least) naïve to the way marketing works; more research than you can imagine has been put into creating effective marketing”.<sup>[2]</sup>

Note: Marketing doesn’t ask us to consume in a healthy way. Buy this phone and the world will be at your fingertips! Shop at this store and you will have a wonderful Christmas filled with pure bliss for your family. Buy this deodorant and women will flock to you! Buy this cream and stop the process of aging so you can be eternally beautiful! Buy this car so you will have freedom and all the pretty ladies will look at you. Side note: I once rode in a classic car and all I got were looks from other men. It’s not that consuming things is necessarily bad; what’s bad is that it’s trying to get you into an unhealthy and insular pattern of making the consumption of things the source of your pleasure, your self-worth, of your very meaning in life.

So what does this have to do with Jesus?

Those of you who were here for my last sermon will know that I spoke on the idea of life before death and death before death. To recap for those who weren’t here or weren’t paying attention, I talked about the idea that we have gotten the Gospel wrong by focusing almost exclusively on the question of “where will you go after you die?”. Rather a Kingdom-centered understanding of the Gospel shows us that Jesus is not just calling us to life after death but also to life before death.

So what are some examples of death before death?

*Separation from God, hatred, apathy, racism, etc.*

And what are some examples of life before death?

*Unity with God, love, shalom, peace, joy, etc.*

And the traits found in the life column are found in the Kingdom of God. The Kingdom of God is a spiritual reality that refers to when God’s will is present and being done. Humans thrive and worship their creator. And the Bible portrays the Kingdom of God as being in conflict with the kingdom of this world. It’s the difference between a message of selfish consumption and behaviour and a message that emphasises selflessness and love.

And the way we enter this Kingdom is through Jesus who unifies us with God. Lately, we’ve heard about the different “I Am” sayings of Jesus. Last week we heard Ian speak of Jesus’ saying “I am the good shepherd”. And in today’s reading we heard Jesus saying “I am the true vine”.

But why a vine? It seems a bit of an odd choice. Viticulture was a vitally important practice in the ancient Near East due to the ability of vines to survive the harsh, arid conditions of the land. But more importantly, it fits into a pattern we see of Jesus describing himself using symbols that held great importance in Judaism, such as a

shepherd, bread, and water. In the Old Testament, the vine was representative of Israel. Psalm 80 talks about God transplanting a vine from Egypt and planting it in ground He had prepared. Isaiah 5 tells the Song of the Vineyard, in which God plants a vineyard in the most fertile land possible with a guard tower and a winepress. But despite everything he did the vineyard only produced bad fruit. And so Jesus takes this imagery and applies it to himself. Except that where Israel failed to bear fruit, Jesus is the true vine who is successful in bearing fruit.

And so Jesus changes the focus from being part of a particular ethnic group or rooted in a particular land to being rooted in Jesus. Instead of being a physical reality confined to a small area of land, the Kingdom that Jesus calls us into spans the whole world. There's this sense from the Garden of Eden, to Israel, to the Kingdom of God, to the New Creation that this whole thing is expanding. Before I move on I want to make something clear; this is not to say that God has abandoned the Jews as a failed project. Rather Jesus' words and teaching is to emphasise that he is Israel's Messiah and the fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant.

Now here's something that is really crucial to understand about what Jesus is saying: he is not prescribing what we might call religious behaviour modification or "fake it till you make it" thinking. We do not bear fruit in order to be accepted, rather we have been accepted and loved by Christ and bearing fruit is a by-product of abiding in him. Gary Burge notes that there have traditionally been three elements that define the Christian life. The first is believing the right things. The second is living an ethical life. But these two things cannot stand apart from the third element. In fact, there can be a real danger in doing so. We've all encountered people who act as religious gatekeepers and look down on those who don't have the same 100% correct grasp of Christian doctrine that they do. And there are those who are so concerned with living right that they seem to have no life. So what is this third element? It's an experiential encounter with Jesus.

And this is key because we are not called to be vines. We are called to be branches. What happens if you cut a branch off from a vine? It withers and dies and is incapable of bearing fruit. And so if we remain apart from Jesus we wither and die and fail to bear fruit.

But enough of this analogy with all its talk of vines and fruit and pruning. What is Jesus saying in plain English? After all, most of us aren't viticulturists and even Jesus often found himself having to give a plain English (well, Aramaic) explanation of his parables. Jesus is the vine, we are the branches that are connected to him and rely on him for life, but what is the fruit? Jesus actually says it rather plainly in the next few verses. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you. Now remain in my love. If you keep my commands, you will remain in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commands and remain in his love. I have told you this so that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete. My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you." The answer is love. When we talk of loving others we

sometimes use the analogy of a bucket; we say that we pour ourselves out into other people. And what happens to a bucket that is being poured out? Eventually, it will run dry unless it is being refilled. And so Jesus is saying that just as he is loved by the Father, he also loves us. And we are commanded to show each other this same love. After all, in the same farewell sermon Jesus says that people will know us as his disciples not by our grasp of proper doctrine, or self-righteousness, or by our Jesus fish bumper sticker, but by the love we show others.

So abiding in Jesus is about being in a state where we rely on him, we understand our value through him, and we can love others because of him.

But who gets to abide in Jesus? Is it the good religious folk or something else?

In Acts 8 we find the story of an Ethiopian eunuch on his way to Jerusalem.

So why is it important that the man is both an Ethiopian and a eunuch? Firstly, the fact that he is an Ethiopian suggests that he was either a gentile or a diaspora Jew – a Jew in exile. Scholars tend to think that the former is more likely – that he is a gentile. But the fact that he is reading Isaiah while on his way to Jerusalem to worship suggests that he is a God-fearing gentile. However, just because he was God-fearing it did not mean that he was part of the “in-group”. As a gentile he was forbidden to journey past the Outer Courts of the Temple (sometimes called the Court of the Gentiles). In fact, some of you may remember that when Jesus cleared the moneychangers and merchants out of the Temple he was clearing them out of the Court of the Gentiles. That’s one thing that counts against him. But as well as being a gentile he was also a eunuch. A eunuch was someone who had proven themselves worthy of a position of great responsibility; often looking after a king’s harem of women. And the way they proved themselves worthy of this position was by castrating themselves as a sign of devotion. And Jewish law didn’t look too kindly on this practice. Deuteronomy 23 states that eunuchs were forbidden from being a member of the Lord’s assembly. So that’s two marks against him. And a third thing I realised when writing this sermon is that the eunuch, acting as important government official, would have been very wealthy. Think about how wealthy young men are portrayed in the gospels: they are shown as being unwilling to accept the Gospel.

In short, the eunuch is the wrong guy to accept the Gospel. Yet he is absolutely enthusiastic about being grafted into Jesus when Philip tells him the good news. He goes away rejoicing at the new life he has in Christ. And that’s the beauty of the Gospel: someone who had previously been excluded is now included in Christ. In fact, the Gospel is especially good news for everybody who doesn’t fit in because everybody is invited to participate in this life that Jesus provides no matter their class or social standing.

Shortly we will be partaking in communion – a celebration of the life we have in Jesus both before and after death. I ask that we do two things today when taking

communion. The first is that we pass the peace first. This is something that we take for granted but it is a simple act of love with great symbolism behind it. When we shake hands and bless each other with the peace of Christ we are saying that there is nothing separating us as a church family. We are making peace with each other. The second is to reflect on the meaning of communion when we take it. My absolute favourite description of what happens at communion is that we come forward with empty hands with nothing to give and we receive the body and blood of Christ. Our poverty is exchanged with grace and life.

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<sup>[1]</sup> Peter Coffin, *Custom Reality and You* (2018),135.

<sup>[2]</sup> Ibid., 136.