

CALL TO INTIMACY

Genesis 17:1; John 15:1-4, 15

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When Abram was ninety-nine years old, the LORD appeared to him and said, "I am God Almighty; walk before me faithfully and be blameless (Gen 17:1)

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also 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... I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends (John 15:1-4, 15)

SUMMARY

Jesus calls us—everyone—friends and invites us to intimacy with him.

WHO ARE JESUS' FRIENDS?

Jesus' statement identifying the disciples as friends is mind-blowing considering who the disciples were at the time of the Lord's Supper and what they would do in the next few hours. True to his self-declaration as "friend of sinners" (Matt 11:19; Luke 7:34), Jesus embraced people with the lowest socio-political status and moral reputation.

PARADIGM SHIFT

Jesus redefines friendship as an unconditional offer of affection, unconcerned about past and future offenses. This is God's *hesed*, faithful love. The invitation to union, communion, and fellowship is for those who feel worthy but are not, those who judge themselves unworthy, and those who are judged unworthy by others.

THE VINE ANALOGY

Our Evangelical translation and interpretation of John 15:2 reveals our penchant for judgmentalism that justifies callous exclusion instead of gracious reconciliation. NIV for instance, translates the verse as "He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes." Considering that the key admonition in verses 4-10 is to abide or remain in Christ, the statement about being "cut off" seems out of place. I propose that verse 2, therefore, be translated differently. The Greek word used for "cuts off" is *airei* from the root *airo*, which can be translated as "to pull away," "to take away," or "to lift up."¹ In the light of the context of the conversation, it seems that the better translation is "every branch in me that does not bear fruit he lifts up or raises up."

THE EXAMPLE OF ABRAHAM

¹ See Joseph C. Dillow, "Abiding Is Remaining in Fellowship: Another Look at John 15:1-6," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 147:585 (January-March 1990), 50; R. K. Harrison, s.v. "Vine," in *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia* (4 vols. Revised ed. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986): 4: 986; and James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978), 4: 227-28.

Abraham's life was similar to that of the disciples. It was a life of ups and downs. In response to life's ups and downs, God comes and reveals his name to Abraham. In Genesis 17, he called himself *El Shaddai*. Instead of translating *Shaddai* from *shadu*, we translate *Shaddai* from *shad*, which means "breast." El Shaddai, therefore, is not merely God Almighty, but also God Who Has Breasts. To a person who has experienced many tribulations, God reveals himself as the God who is nurturing. God is a faithful mother who continues to cuddle his children, even if they are the most annoying and selfish beings. He stoops down to carry mud-covered children; he silences their cries by leaning them close to him and feeding them with his own nutrition. The image of a mother feeding her own child is one of the most vivid portrayals of intimacy.

CONCLUSION

What God demands from us is that we remain in him. He does not ask that we live the most perfect life. He understands that like Abraham and the disciples, we have a lot of shortcomings. What he asks is intimacy with him. To Abraham he asked, "walk before me faithfully" and to the disciples Jesus asked "remain in me." Relationship precedes missional productivity.