

# Thursday Theology: “The Abiding Promise”: A Last Sermon at the Closing of a Congregation

Co-missioners,

Last week we sent you Matt Metevelis’ thoughts in the days before the last worship service at the congregation he’d been serving in Las Vegas. The service was held on Reformation Sunday, October 29, 2023. Matt preached. He sent us his manuscript. We share it with you here.

In doing this, we invite prayers for the scattered saints of that former congregation, Living Hope Lutheran. May the Holy Spirit wake them up tomorrow still recalling the inviting promise that Christ used their pastor to underscore: “Remain in me. I’m remaining in you. They can never get the ‘me’ out of you.”

Another prayer: that this promise is heard in every other church that will endure such scattering before this year is out. There are sure to be many of them across the U.S. Such are the times we find ourselves in. “Trust me,” says the One who has seen a lot worse and knows how to bring us through it.

Peace and Joy,  
The Crossings Community

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# **"The Abiding Promise": A Last Sermon at the Closing of a Congregation**

by Matthew Metevelis

*John 15:1-11*

I am the true vine, and my Father is the vine-grower. <sup>2</sup>He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. <sup>5</sup>I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. <sup>9</sup>As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. <sup>10</sup>If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love. <sup>11</sup>I have said these things to you so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete.

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Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from his Son, our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.



*Living Hope Lutheran, Las Vegas*

Loss can be meaningful. There are times when it's not the reaction to the loss, or the coping with the loss, or the healing from the loss—but in the reality of the loss itself that we have the most to learn. The novelist Colson Whitehead pointed this exact fact to the citizens of New York in the months after they were still reeling from 9/11.

“No matter how long you have been here,” he wrote, “you are a New Yorker the first time you say ‘That used to be a Munsey’s’, or ‘That used to be the Tic Toc lounge.’ That before the internet café plugged itself in, you got your shoes resoled at a mom-and-pop operation that used to be there. You are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is there now.”

I think you could probably say the same about Las Vegas. My real introduction to this city was not in the things we normally think of, like going to the Strip and being bored for the first time or sighting Flav a Flav at Walmart. Nope, it was in meeting people who remembered when major city streets were just dirt roads, who pined for the days when you couldn't get into a show without a jacket or when a prime rib dinner was just a couple of bucks. I learned about this town not from the people who knew, but the people who remembered. I came to see the core of this place when I met people who had been around long enough to accumulate losses—those for whom what was there before is more real and solid than what is there now.

I think Whitehead's description fits many characters in Scripture too. Adam and Eve cast from the garden, Abraham sent away from Ur, Joseph sold into slavery in Egypt, Moses and the Israelites leaving Egypt. So many Biblical stories are about people leaving their home. Most of the authors of their stories probably wrote them down as sons and daughters of Israel living in captivity in Babylon, a strange land, ridden with anxiety that their children might forget who they are. The Bible is a book by and for refugees, outsiders, and outcasts, and about God's gracious dealings with them in promises kept through weird and wild miracles and grievous losses of God's own. The story of Scripture is the story of God meeting people in exile.

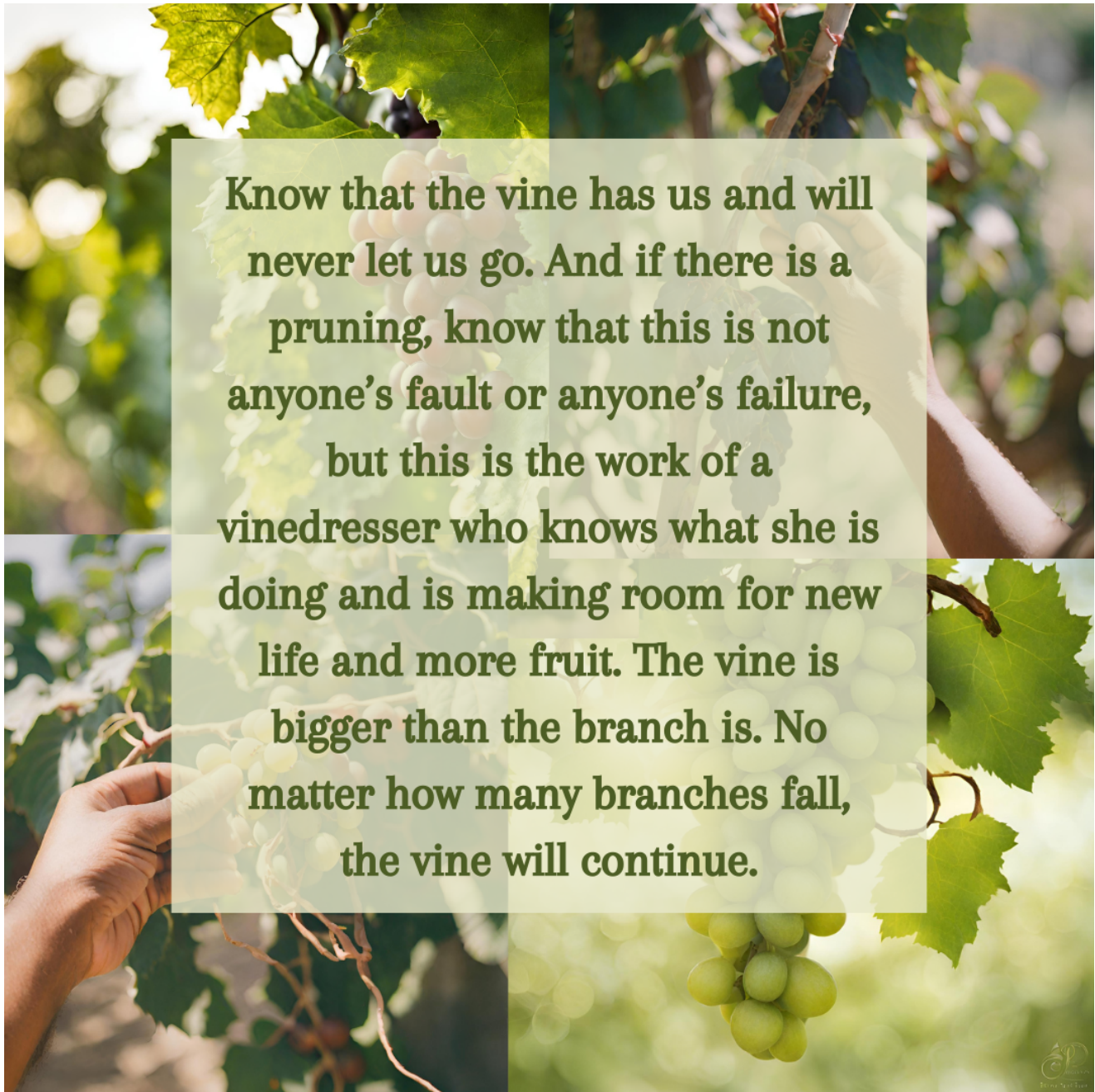
For 75 years we've told that story here. But today, our last day, we are being led to live this story. We are now being called to leave our garden. We are all now going out and seeking a new land, leaving behind this place that means so much to us. We join the story as God's people so often do. Sent from places of comfort, safety, and security into an uncertain future.

But God never sends them alone, and God won't send us alone either. If you read Genesis 3 carefully you'll run across this

little overlooked detail, that before Adam and Eve are kicked out God personally dresses them. And God dresses us today with a promise Christ makes in our gospel lesson. "Remain in me" he says, "as I remain in you."

Christians confuse this all the time. They think that Jesus is saying "you have to remain in me for me to stay with you." But in reality, it's the opposite. We are able to remain in Christ because Jesus has promised to remain in us. It's not a demand. It's an invitation. "Remain in me. I'm remaining in you. They can never get the 'me' out of you. You've got my name stamped on you. I am a part of you wherever you go, whatever you do."

It's never only a place that keeps us connected to God. It's the living, breathing, unshakeable reality of a God who has claimed, blessed, encouraged, and called us.



*From Canva*

We screw this up all the time when we think that being branches means we have to strive to be the best branches we can be. Truth is, the branches just have to stay put, stay attached, or “abide” as the Big Lebowski translates it. Branches don’t have to be anxious, don’t have to strive, don’t have to do anything other than rest where the source of life comes from, and just remain and give thanks as the life that pours through them bears fruit. Just be at peace. Just be still. Know that the vine has

us and will never let us go. And if there is a pruning, know that this is not anyone's fault or anyone's failure, but this is the work of a vinedresser who knows what she is doing and is making room for new life and more fruit. The vine is bigger than the branch is. No matter how many branches fall, the vine will continue. This means seeing losses not as morality tales or casualties of changing times, but as significant stories that have so much meaning as the places that shaped us, the places where the vine nourished us; as the little losses that pointed us to what can never be taken away.

When each branch falls, we can better see the vine.

Our little branch is cherished and treasured by God because of all the time we shared in the vine. The whole seventy-five-year life of this little branch of Christ's church has been to exist in the shadow of the Strip as a little neon sign pointing to Christ, the true vine. This sanctuary and community has nourished and given life to tourists, hospitality workers, teachers, addicts, and youth from troubled homes. I know because so many of you did this for me. It goes beyond sermons and Sunday schools, beyond the official stuff the church does or the holy sounding words we put on paper.

People came off the streets here and participated in our life together. Instead of making the youth group into hired hands the people of this congregation cared for them, supported them, and sat down for countless "brunches with brilliance" sharing joy and wisdom. These halls were opened up for families who were struggling to get on their feet. People lost in the bowels of addiction came here for community as well as recovery decades ago at a time when addicts were looked down on with derision by churches. People from this place fought to keep a middle school open, people told their stories to public officials and advocated for their neighbors. LGBTQ individuals could come here

for a long time and not hide who they are and celebrate with God the beautiful and creative diversity that God plants at the heart of the human spirit.

Anyone who's worked here will tell you that those doors did not stay quiet but rang constantly with a symphony of sad stories and needs and struggles that were met with compassion by our staff. Reformation stayed here while the neighborhood changed around it because we had a genuine call to be Christ's heart in the heart of the city. Countless people came to take part, to have their own hearts transformed, and people who came in just to find a place to worship on a vacation were treated like life-long friends and often found heart-felt letters of thanks waiting for them when they got home. People in need here were surrounded by love. And I sat in a Bible study for years where challenging questions were asked, and more than a few poked holes in my rock-ribbed theology in order to flood me with new ways of understanding grace.

Say what you will about what it takes to make church operate well in our current context—but for near twenty years when the demographics and odds were against this little place the people here dug in with a little faith and made this place vital in all the ways you can't count with statistics. This day is not one they would be disappointed in. This day is one which we lift with thanksgiving to God in their honor. Everything we've done, everything we are, all that we had in here just burst with the fruit of the vine and none of us are the same because of it. That is the vine, brothers and sisters, that is Christ, that is the one who will remain with us.

And so yeah, today is hard, right now is hard. I struggled to find the words but instead God gave me a memory. Do any of you remember Terry? Terry was a gentleman who worshipped with us who did not have a home. He was quiet, he was kind, and he had these



piercing blue eyes and wore a grey hat that said “John 3:16. Critical.” I drove to a council meeting one winter night and saw his legs sticking out from the side of the building near a dumpster. Feeling sorry for him I took the left-over cheese and cracker tray from the council meeting and placed it in front of him. He gladly accepted it and munched on a cracker as I sat down next to him. What I said to him was pretty much how I’ve felt this whole past year.

“It’s all that’s left, I wish I could do more.”

Terry just looked at me with those bright blue eyes. And he gave me the last sermon you’ll hear from this pulpit because it contains not only all the others but sums up the abiding witness of this wonderful place:

“We have a good God, don’t we?”

Amen.

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**Thursday Theology: that the benefits of Christ be put to  
use**

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