

Have you ever heard of Deborah Ricketts? You may not know the name, but if you like to go to movies, you've seen her handiwork, even though she never appears on screen. She's never listed in the credits, although she ought to get credit for a lot of what you see in the movies. If a production company wants their movie to be truly authentic, they have to give attention to details and be accurate with their facts. That's something that detracts from my enjoyment at the movies, when I see something that isn't historically accurate. To make sure that doesn't happen, producers send their script and a sizeable check to this former librarian, makes corrections so they can produce a more authentic film.

If they're making a film that was set back in the 1930s, then everything needs to look like the 1930s. They can't have a person singing a song that hadn't been written yet, or reading a newspaper that had yet to be published. Mistakes like that occur all the time.

Like in the Raiders of the Lost Ark series. There's a scene where Indiana Jones is reading a flight map that takes him over Thailand. The problem is the movie was set in 1936 and Thailand was called Siam until 1939. Deborah Ricketts lives to correct things like that. She makes a good living at doing one simple thing – making sure their facts are right.

**XX** We're starting a series called "I AM Jesus." And no, that isn't a typo. The AM is supposed to be capitalized, and the difference that makes is staggering. It's literally life changing, if it leads you where I believe Jesus hopes it will.

What I hope that we'll discover over the next few weeks is this awesome truth: **XX lasting security and true significance can only be found through our connection with Jesus.** That's important because those are two things that people are searching for in life – security and significance. Whether we realize it or not, they're core needs that every person has. God wants us to feel secure, but we're constantly looking for our own ways to make that happen. And we believe that every life God has made counts for something, even if we can't see how. There are so many passages in the Book of John where we'll find him saying so. Those passages are where Jesus states ***as clearly as he can*** exactly what role he wants to have in our lives. Each one of those roles is a way that makes us secure and affirms our significance. And when Jesus says them, he starts out with that simple two word phrase, **XX I AM.**

The reason why those letters are all capitalized is because Jesus said something about himself that no-one else on earth has ever been or will ever be able to say. Back in John 8, religious leaders were peppering him with questions, all designed to try to reveal him as a fraud. Jesus put it right back to them saying, "Your father Abraham rejoiced as he looked forward to my coming. He saw it and was glad." They asked him, "Who do you think you are, saying you've seen Abraham?" To that Jesus answered, "I tell you the truth, before Abraham was even born, I AM!"

I've heard people say that Jesus never claimed to be God. That was even the premise of the movie "The DaVinci Code." But the fact is, if you understand what Jesus said and how he said it, that's exactly what he did. He claimed for himself the name that God gave Moses at the burning bush. I AM. It gives me chills to think what it would have been like to hear him say that. And all the evidence you need that he was claiming God's name for himself is how upset the religious leaders became when he said it. They wanted to kill him for blaspheming the holy name of God. Except for one thing. He was right.

That's what makes all of those times when Jesus started a sentence with I AM so filled with power. That's why what he said can change your life, because it's God himself who is saying to you and to everyone, "these are the ways I want to bring you security and significance."

You can see those I AM statements portrayed in the stained glass windows around you in this room. They were expertly created and captioned by our own Mike Tradowsky. He's in Canada right now, or we'd give him some well-deserved appreciation for the gift he gave to this church. If you're new to WHUMC, you should also know that he did the Christ sculpture in the front window, too.

**XX** The specific "I AM" statement we're looking at today is found in the 15<sup>th</sup> chapter of the book of John, which you may recognize from the video as having been our theme at Annual Conference this year. So let's set the stage for what Jesus wanted to say to his disciples, as he said I AM the Vive.

It's possible that Jesus had just left the Upper Room, where he had just finished the Last Supper with his disciples. Maybe he was walking with them to the Garden of Gethsemane. And maybe as he walked along, he paused near an arbor where grapevines were growing. They were so valuable back then that you could find them planted all over. When those vines were properly cultivated and kept, they produced sweet grapes, which were used to make wine. It was very important for the gardener to keep those vines expertly trimmed, so they could bear lots of fruit. That's what Jesus wanted for his followers, too. He knew the cross was ahead of him, and he knew that if the good news of salvation was going to get out, those disciples had to be prepared to do it. So he taught them. His father's purpose rested with those men, so he wanted them to understand just how critical it would be for them not to let what he did fade away. So he says something to them that might have stung a little. In fact he said it over and over.

**XX** Talking about his father, he says, "He cuts off every branch of mine that doesn't produce fruit." Maybe he reached down and picked up a branch that had been pruned off the vine. And you can well imagine it would have been dried out, brittle and lifeless. Maybe he snapped it to drive home his point.

**XX** But Jesus doesn't leave them anxiously looking at each other. He gives them the way to avoid that fate. "I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit."

When you try to connect with what Jesus was saying to you in this passage, keep three things in mind. They're pretty much self-evident, but then sometimes those are the points that are most easily overlooked. XX Three things -- God is the gardener. Jesus is the vine. We're the branches. And the gardener only has one concern for the branch - he wants the branch to bear fruit. In fact he wants it to bear as much fruit as it possibly can. After all, that's the purpose of the branch - to bear fruit.

A branch by itself has no value. I love grapes, but I don't ever see grape BRANCHES for sale at Giant Eagle -- except maybe when they're woven into a wreath for decoration. I'm not going to munch on a grape **branch**. The fact is, other than bearing fruit, a branch doesn't have a reason to exist. It finds its whole meaning in setting the fruit that the vine enables it to.

What the gardener desires for the branch, is what God desires for you and me. He wants us to live a life that is real and authentic. He wants our days filled with significant moments that make us feel like we have purpose. What makes all that happen is the fruit that that faith-filled life bears. Just as a branch can only bear fruit if it's connected to the vine -- real, lasting, true spiritual significance can only come when you are connected to Jesus Christ. There's no better way to make that point than how Jesus did here in John 15. What you do every day will be most significant and most fruitful and most productive when you XX 1) Relate

To Christ Inwardly, 2) Reflect Christ Outwardly, and 3) Remain In Christ Continuously. Let's take a quick look at each of these.

**XX** Relate To Christ Inwardly -- Whether you're a follower of Christ or not, Jesus was talking to you in this passage. "I am the true grapevine, and my Father is the gardener. Yes, I am the vine; you are the branches. Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit."

Even though Jesus spoke these words to His disciples, what He said here was for everyone. In those verses, he gives us one of the best definitions of what it means to be Christian that you will ever read. Let's face it -- "Christian" has become one of the most misunderstood and misapplied labels in our culture. According to what Jesus tells us here, a Christian is simply someone who is joined to Christ, just as a branch is joined to a vine. In other words, being a Christian is all about having the right connection. Now there's a really important "SO THAT" that goes with this, and we'll get to that in a moment. But for right now, focus on what Jesus said about "remaining in him".

How many times have you ever heard people say, "Hey, it's all about who you know." They tell you that the way to get ahead or accepted or promoted or hired – it's about knowing the right person. Call it networking or whatever, it helps to have connections. When it comes to bearing fruit, when it comes to living a life of significance, nothing could be more true, because bearing fruit that lasts is all about who you know. It is all about being deeply connected to Jesus Christ.

Do you realize that this statement is unique to the religions of the world? No other religion offers its followers a personal union and connection with its founder like this. I can't think of another religion that invites its followers to have the same kind of relationship that Jesus invites his people to have with him – like a branch connected to a vine.

Jesus said in verse 5, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." At face value, we may question whether he was right about that. We can do lots of things without him. We can earn a living, raise a family, do good to other people, attend church and be religious – we can do all of that without Jesus. What we CAN'T do without him is to bear the spiritual fruit of a Christ-like life that will have an eternal impact and give us the security and significance we're looking for.

See, the branch BEARS the fruit, it doesn't PRODUCE it. The first step for you and me to have an eternal impact and to be significant is to make sure that we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Otherwise, you'll no more find significance in life than a branch can bear fruit without being connected to the vine. It can't happen without that relationship with Jesus. And once you're connected, you then... **XX** II. Reflect Jesus Outwardly

Jesus said, " You didn't choose me. I chose you. ***I appointed you to go and produce lasting fruit...***" Usually, I try to be cautious about assuming that everything Jesus said to his disciples he meant for everyone. But this is one place I do think that's the case. It just seems consistent with his message that he's

talking about anyone who becomes connected to the vine. God's number one concern for the advance of his kingdom is the same concern a gardener has for his vine and his branches. He wants his people to be fruitful, or his message won't get out. As much as anything else in your life, God is concerned about your fruitfulness.

But just what IS this fruit that Jesus talked about? Well, when you go to an apple tree, what are you going to find? Apples. What will you find on a pear tree? Pears. Grapevines were designed to produce grapes. A Christ follower, who **by definition** is someone joined to Jesus, is going to produce Christ-likeness. But let's get more specific -- just what does it mean to be Christ-like? The answer's in what God inspired Paul to write about in Galatians 5. This is what Christ-like fruit looks like. **XX** "...The Holy Spirit produces this kind of fruit in our lives: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Folks, this is that HUGE **SO THAT** I mentioned earlier. God uses the Bible to tell us what he wants to happen in us – by showing us what a life looks like that reflects the character of Jesus himself.

**XXb** Keep in mind that the gardener's number one concern for branch is not only that it just bears fruit, but to maximize production, so you'll notice there's a progression in this matter of bearing fruit. First of all, Jesus talked about a branch that didn't bear any. Then it was a branch that DID bear fruit, but was **pruned** so that it could bear even more. Then in verse 5, it's about what God's aiming for in



all this when Jesus says, "Those who remain in me, and I in them, will produce much fruit." But then he goes one step *further*. In verse 16, he says, "I appointed you to go and produce *lasting* fruit."

What that sounds like to me is that God wants us to not only live a life of significance, but of *increasing* significance. God wants you to become as much like Jesus as you can be, because he's the gardener who does that work. You just have to let him – again, you can't MAKE the fruit, you can only BEAR it.

God has His shears ready to work on what will keep us spiritually undernourished. We can call them circumstances. God uses them to reveal those ways we're trying to find security and significance on our own. When we see them for what they are, God wants us to choose to be more closely attached to the vine and therefore bear more fruit. You can hear the sound of His shears at work when you're confined to a hospital room, or fired from a job, or your spouse leaves you for someone else, or a troubled child leaves home. All so often, when this happens we get angry or bitter or resentful. But what we're failing to recognize is how God pruning away our pride or our dependency on all the wrong things. He's inviting us to get back to our true connection with Jesus because it's in him we'll find our security and significance.

You already know those aren't comfortable moments. Pruning's probably going to cause some pain. It's cutting. It hurts. But think about this -- whenever the gardener is pruning the branch, it's because he values it and he wants that

branch to maximize its significance. Listen carefully. The fact that God is at work in my life tells you that you matter to him. It's easy to think that troubles, trials, heartaches and difficulties are signs that God doesn't care. But when we trust that he's with us in them, they actually become signs of his love. Jesus' brother James wrote, "Dear brothers and sisters, whenever trouble comes your way, let it be an opportunity for joy. For when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be strong in character and ready for anything."

**XX** Remember this - the hand of the gardener is never closer to the branch than when He's pruning it. During those times when you feel God's sheers at work, He's letting you know you matter to him.

Just as a gardener wants the branch to be fruitful, all the time, God wants the same thing for us. So, we must... **XX** 3) Remain In Christ Continuously.

Surprisingly, there are only two commands given in this entire passage of scripture. One is in verse 4, "Remain in Me." It's so important that John records 7 times Jesus said it. It simply means we are to continuously make Jesus Christ the center of our thoughts, the focus of our life and the passion of our hearts. The other command is one Jesus made often. Love one another.

We can't MAKE fruit. We can't manufacture it. We can only bear it, and the way we do that is by staying connected to the vine. All a branch has to do to be

fruitful is to stay connected. All we have to do to have security and significance in our lives is to stay connected to Jesus Christ.

Remaining in Jesus is spending time with him. Let Him speak to you as you study the Bible. Listen for him in prayer. Unburden your heart to him. Tell him what you're thankful for. And believe it when he tells you how much he loves you.

Relate, Reflect, Remain. That's how Jesus says we'll find security and significance in life. Next week, we'll see how he shepherds us in the way he wants us to go. Let's pray.