

Series: Jesus Changes Everything

**Presence—Life with God**

Sermon by Lead Pastor Paul Joslin

John 15:4-5

Waterstone Community Church, Littleton, Colorado

Sunday morning, January 19, 2025

A reading from John 15:4 through 7; “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 am the vine. You are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit. Apart from me, you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire, and burned. If you remain in me, and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and will be done for you,” the word of the Lord.

Paul: Good morning. How is everyone doing today? Good. It is so good to see you. Today at the end of service, we are going to be doing something very special. We have two people that are being baptized today, Dan Steele, who is right over there, and Peter Gomez. We are so excited to be baptizing them at the end of service, and here is the thing. I want to let you know that after they are baptized, we are actually going to have an open response time. If there is someone else here today that wants to be baptized, we are going to invite you and make a space where you could be baptized. Now, here is the thing, it is zero degrees outside, and you are probably thinking, “I did not even bring a change of clothes.” I get that. We actually came prepared. We have a change of clothes for you if you decide you want to get baptized, and so just as we are going through the message today, as we are responding, if you feel like that is something that maybe the Lord is leading you to do in your life, then we would love to make space for that. So just heads up, because I think there are probably some details you have to think through about that, when it is negative seven degrees or whatever it is out there. Let me pray for us, and then I want to jump into our series continuing today.

Heavenly Father, God, we come before you, Holy Spirit, and we just invite you into this place. As we continue this series, this idea that Jesus changes everything, God, I pray that that would not just be something that we say, but something that we believe in, God, something that we experience, and so we just invite you into this space right now. We know that you are present with us. We attune our hearts to you, and we just ask you to meet us as we pray for an encounter with you through the power of your word, and it is in Christ name we pray, amen.

All right, so we are three weeks into this series, and I want to do a little bit of review to start, but I want to know who was paying attention last week, based on this opening line. I have a confession as a pastor that I need to tell all of you today that is based on the message last week, and that is this, on Wednesday, I ate at Taco Bell again. Okay, all right, look at that, we have some people paying attention. I did. It was like 2:30 in the afternoon. I realized I had not had lunch. I picked the kids up from school, and I was like, “I am so hungry. Oh, there is a Taco Bell right over there. Why don’t I just go?” and it was delicious, and I felt so terrible, regretted it so much. To be fair though, I received multiple pictures from some of you that after last week’s message you went to Taco Bell and got your own Taco Bell, so it was not just I that was inspired.

For those of you who are like, “What is he talking about? Why are we opening the sermon talking about Taco Bell?” Last week we were talking about this idea of who we are becoming and how oftentimes when we think of change and transformation in our lives, what we think of is this idea that if I just know the right stuff, then that will produce the change I am looking for, but my point was we all know Taco Bell is very bad for us, and yet we still eat Taco Bell, and so that is what that is, but these are the things we have been looking at as we have been diving into this series, Jesus Changes Everything. How do we experience the change that is available to us? So, the first week we looked at this idea of who you are, and we looked at our identity and how transformation, the change that Jesus has for us, begins with understanding our identity in Christ, and that this phrase, “in Christ,” is used over 160 times in the New Testament, really the foundation of who we are, what Christ has done for us, and last week we asked this question, “Who are you becoming?” and we looked at this idea that we are constantly, always becoming someone, and that the call to follow Jesus, the call of discipleship, is to orient our lives around the objective of becoming more like Jesus, but Jesus is different than any other self-help project that you will find on the market, because Jesus is not about trying to make you better or making you go from bad to good. Jesus is in the business of bringing dead people back to life, but the way He does that is so counterintuitive. It is actually giving up our lives, dying to self, that we see change and transformation take place in our lives, so that hopefully orients you where we have been for the last couple weeks.

Today, what I would like to do is look at this question: “How do we become who we want to be?” If we start with identity, and then we start with this call to discipleship, to follow Jesus, and if our goal and objective as a community and as individuals is to become more like Jesus and live for others, then how do we go about accomplishing that? The answer is probably the most unexciting answer I could ever give you, because the answer is practice. Now it is not just Allen Iverson who does not like practice, right? If some of you remember that quote from back in the day, practice is not something that any of us get excited about. Like we don’t get excited about showing up at 6:00 a.m. for practice and running lines and doing drills. What do we get excited about? We get excited about performing in the game. No one’s excited about practicing piano for hours and learning chord charts and trying to figure out how to become a better musician. The best part of learning a new instrument is when you get to show off all your skills that you have been practicing at the recital. No one is just like, “What I really love is all the hard work of practice,” so I realize inherently that this statement is just like, “That sounds like, okay, I have to practice if I want to become more like Jesus? What are you talking about?” but think about it this way.

I have a one-year-old son, and he loves music. Any time music comes on, he just starts doing his little one-year-old dance, and he loves music. So, let’s say he comes to me and says, “Daddy, I really want to learn to be an amazing musician. I want to be a master piano player, and I want to learn to play Beethoven and Bach,” and what would I say? Well, at first, I would be like, “Wow, you are one, and you know who Beethoven and Bach are? That is amazing. Wow, you are a genius,” but if I just came to him, and I said, “Okay, what you need to do to become a master pianist is you need to just try really, really hard, and you just need to sit at the keys and just bang away at them until finally you get it.” Like, no, absolutely not, right, because becoming a master musician is not about just trying really hard. You have to actually train. You have to understand how to read music. You have to understand the way that chords

work together, and if you train at it, then you can become someone who can play Bach or Beethoven, not at one year old, but at two. We will shoot for two years old.

Or let's say my daughter, who has just started watching sports with me, she comes to me, and she says, "Daddy, that Caitlyn Clark, I want to be able to shoot a basketball like her," and I am like, "Great, awesome, good goal, make Daddy some money, like that sounds phenomenal. How do we go about doing that? I am just going to pray for you, and we are just going to pray every day that God makes you a really, really good shooter of the basketball, okay?" Now I would never do that. Why? Because it is not just a matter of praying and hoping that God will somehow just download onto her the ability to shoot a basketball like Caitlyn Clark, matrix-style, right? The way that that happens is through training. Caitlyn Clark, as good as she is, did not just wake up one morning and have the ability to shoot it from ninety feet like it was a layup, right? She had to work at that, but why do we think that those are the solutions when it comes to our spirituality? Because if we say a statement like we want to become more like Jesus, if that is the kind of person we want to become, so many times, what does that look like in our lives?

It looks like, "Well, I just got to try really hard to be more like Jesus, and so I am going to commit to going to church, and I am going to read my Bible, and I am going to memorize scripture, and I am going to make sure I pray fifteen minutes a day, and I am going to just try really hard to do all of the things that will make me become more like Jesus," and then what happens? You do it for a few days, and then we get behind in our Bible reading plan, and suddenly we feel like a failure, so we just back off and think, "I just can't try hard enough," and then we rinse, cycle, and repeat, right? Or we just come to Jesus, and we say, "Jesus, I need to be more patient. I want to be more patient, like you. Please make me more patient," and then what happens? We do not feel more patient. We still lose our temper, become angry at the person in our life who frustrates us, and we think that this idea of becoming more like Jesus is just about trying really hard or praying really hard through it, but I think it actually, when we look at the life of Jesus, and when we look at what it means to be a disciple, it is not about just trying really hard. It is not just about praying or just yielding ourselves to change. It is actually stepping into daily rhythms of practice, where we learn to train ourselves to become more like Jesus, but here is the thing.

When we talk about practices, when we talk about spiritual disciplines, the difference of Jesus, and where we go wrong so often is that we think practicing to be like Jesus is all about making sure we do the right stuff, and so we create a checklist of what it means to become more like Jesus, and we try to check all the boxes, and if I do all of the stuff, then that will give me the life that I am looking for, but the idea of practice with Jesus is not about doing the right things. It is much more about becoming the kind of person who looks like Jesus, and it is important that we start with the right objective when we start talking about this idea of practice, and so over the next few weeks of the series, I want to talk a little bit about practices that I think Jesus is calling us into as a community, the kind of people I think Jesus is calling us to be in the world that we are living in.

To be honest with you, this is probably the closest thing I have to a vision of what Jesus is calling Waterstone to in 2025, and so I think that as we look at the year ahead and the kind of people Jesus wants us to be, I think Jesus is calling us, the Holy Spirit is leading us to be a people of presence in a culture obsessed with productivity. I think Jesus is calling us to be a people of community in a culture that is dying of loneliness. I think Jesus is leading us to be a people of simplicity in a culture that is burning out on

intensity. I think Jesus is calling us to be a people of generosity in a world that is terrified of scarcity, and I think Jesus is calling us to be a people of hospitality in a culture of isolation and division. I think this is what it means to become more like Jesus and live for others in our particular. Amen, yeah, He's with us. I think this is what Jesus is calling us to, and so today the kind of people that we want to be, what I'd like to take a little bit of time to do is to talk about this idea of what it means to be a people of presence in a culture obsessed with productivity.

I do not really feel like I have to go very hard at making the argument that our culture is obsessed with productivity. In fact, last night we did something a little different on Saturday night, because due to the weather, there were just fewer people here, and so I actually changed up my sermon. Instead of monologue, we just dialogued, and I asked people like, "Where do you see our culture obsessed with productivity?" and they gave some great answers. Someone said simply like, just look at the way we interact with each other when we greet each other. If you ask someone how they're doing, there are usually one of two answers that you get, and either people say, "I'm fine," or what is the other? "I am busy," right? "I am super busy. I have so much on my plate, everything," and we almost wear it as a badge of honor, how busy we are. Arthur Brooks talks about how our culture has become so obsessed with productivity that we have really gotten to the place where we are just called success machines, that we live our life trying to be successful and productive, and we are just machines in a factory. Someone else last night said, "Sometimes I think of productivity and how our culture is obsessed with it, with how our relationship with rest suffers," and he gave the example, and I am sure none of you have ever experienced this, but have you ever gone on vacation and found that you almost have withdrawal the first couple days of vacation, because you do not know what to do with yourself, because you are pausing, and you are resting, and you are so used to trying put out or do things that you don't really know what to do with yourself? You do not know how to rest.

Someone else said, "Think about how we value metrics in ourselves. Everything comes down to numbers. From the time you are born, you are given a number about how successful you are going to be with grades, and then that continues for the rest of our life." I was talking to someone afterwards, and I thought of it this way even. Just think about how we treat people who are less productive. Think about the way our culture just devalues children, or the elderly, or the disabled. Why, because they can't contribute. They are not productive enough, and so we do not have a category of their value. It is a demonic lie that our worth and value is based on how much we can produce, that we would begin to set aside people who are less productive and think that that is where their inherent worth and value is found.

We can see all sorts of different areas where we are obsessed with productivity, and here is the thing, we were not created for endless output. I am not just some millennial up here saying, "Don't work as hard. Let's stop working." I have a strong work ethic, but I can see in our culture this obsession with the way that we cannot rest, the way that we constantly have to put out and being productive. It actually goes against the very fabric of creation, because you think of how God created the world and how He called us to live, and He called us to take care of the creation. There is an element of productivity, "Take care of the Earth and subdue it, but then what did he tell us to do? To rest, like ingrained in the fabric of who we were created to be is to produce, yes, but then to also pause, that we are not just output machines, success machines. We are called to be a people of presence.

Now I want you to think about your days and how you go about your day. I mean, how often do you get caught up in this rhythm of production, trying to produce, going from one thing to another, and leading, work, all the things that you are expected to do in your day, and how often as you go through those days and those moments do you experience the presence of God? How much does our business and our obsession with productivity actually hinder us from experiencing the presence of God in our lives? We were not just made for endless output, but we were made for rest, and we are made to experience life in God's presence, and sometimes our obsession with productivity actually hinders us from being able to experience life with God.

Jesus has an alternative for us. He does not want us to live in a constant state of burnout and exhaustion, and so in John 15, He says this: "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," He's talking to us, "Neither can you be fruitful unless you remain in me." You cannot be productive unless you remain attached in Jesus. He says, "I am the vine, and you are the branches, and if you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit, but apart from me you can do nothing." Jesus says that there is this idea about how we are supposed to exist in the world, how we are supposed to exist as we go about our day, that we are not just going about our business apart from the presence of God. We actually abide in, remain in, and make our home with God as we go through our day. Everything that we do in life can be done in connection to our relationship with God, experiencing his presence in every moment of every day.

I think that many of us look at life, and we see our pie chart of time that we have, and we look at that, and we divide it up into different quadrants, and so maybe we have work and sleep, and those are the two biggest ones, and then we also have time for family or meals, or we have time at the gym or exercise or entertainment, and then one of those slivers in the pie chart is time with God, where we want to make sure that we spend time with Him, and we pray, and we go to church, and we are in community and a small group, and we think of that as what our life is supposed to be, but I want to challenge that perception, because I think we are actually made to experience life very differently. I think our pie chart is supposed to look more like this, that actually in work and in fun and in exercise, in friends, in Bible study, in prayer and meals, all of it is supposed to be time with God, and in every moment of every day we can experience the transcendent presence of God in our lives. When Jesus invites us to abide with Him and to remain in Him, that means as we go to work, as we go into our meetings, as we change our kids' diapers, as we do the dishes before we go to bed at night, we can experience God's presence in each and every moment, and He wants to be with us in those spaces and experience life with Him. God is with you in all of it, and to abide with Him means that we grow in awareness of his presence every single moment of every single day, no matter what we are doing.

Look back at the verse with me where Jesus talks about this idea of abiding and remaining. I am going to just read it one more time. He says, "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 am the vine, you are the branches, and if you remain in me, and I in you, you will bear much fruit, but apart from me, you can" only do a few things, right? That is how we look at it, but that is not what He says. He says, "Apart from me, you can do nothing." Nothing. All of your goals about being productive, all of the things that you want to accomplish in life, apart from Jesus, you can accomplish nothing apart from Him.

Do we actually believe that? I think it is so easy for us to go through life being completely self-sufficient, thinking, “I have got this. I can take care of what I need to take care of. I can take care of the people in my life. I can do the things that I need to do. I do not really need Jesus in every moment of every day,” or some of us can go to the place where we start trying to live life for God instead of live life with God, and we think the whole point of Christianity and following Jesus and discipleship to Him is trying to produce, not for ourselves, but for the kingdom, and so we have to keep ourselves busy with the stuff of church and doing the Jesus stuff and prayers and scriptures and serving others, and we think if we just do enough of that, that will make us become more like Jesus, but I am here to tell you today, Jesus much more deeply values your presence with Him than your productivity for Him. God is not interested in what you can accomplish for Him, because He could do it all Himself. He wants life with you. He wants you to experience life in communion and trust and love with Him.

Jesus goes on in verse six, and He says this: “If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers. Such branches are picked up and thrown into the fire and burned.” Now I think there are some people who come to this passage, and they misunderstand it a little bit, because it sounds a little bit like judgment, and it sounds a little bit like getting thrown into the lake of fire and end times stuff, and while I think Jesus has a lot to say about judgment, and I am not trying to minimize his teachings on judgment, I am not convinced that that is what He is talking about in this moment, because if you just look at Jesus objectively in this teaching, what is He talking about? He is talking about vines in a vineyard. It is very practical. He is saying that in order to produce fruit in our lives, we have to remain attached to the vine. We are the branches. There is a vine that is the source of life, the source of nutrients for our life, and if we are not attached to that, what happens? We wither, and we are like branches that are thrown away, that are no longer useful, that can no longer produce fruit.

I want to just ask you very practically in your life, has there ever been a time when you have grown spiritually dry, when you have been so busy doing the stuff of Jesus and so convinced that you needed to show up and serve and do this and do that for Jesus that you forgot to be with Jesus? I think there are so many ways we can get caught up in, and we displace the paradigm of productivity that our culture has put on us, and we just shove it over here and put it on our space and say that God wants us to be really productive and do things for Him. I think what Jesus is saying in this teaching is Jesus wants us to experience life with Him, that without remaining in Jesus, our spiritual life will dry up. Without us staying attached to his presence, experiencing his presence in our lives, things will begin to dry up. We will not see the fruit that is available to us in life with Jesus.

It is one of the reasons why as we started this year, I actually shared with our staff that I wanted us as a church and as a leadership team to actually begin to pull back on some of the ways, because this happens in church too. This is not just people who are outside. We can get so caught up in being productive for the church, doing the ministry for the church, that we forget to experience life with Jesus, and so I just challenged our staff, and I said, “I want you to maybe scale back some of your programming. We do not have to over-program everything in our church. I want you to take a day for spiritual renewal, where the sole purpose of your workday is to encounter the presence of God and spend time with Him. I want you to take a couple of days of vacation, and legally I am not allowed to mandate that for you, but I want you to recognize that we do not just have to burn ourselves out for the sake of ministry at the church.”

Of course, we will work hard, but I do not think that Jesus' goal for people who work in churches or people who are following Him is set to burn themselves out for productivity's sake, and so it is this countercultural call to recognize that apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. We are a people of presence over productivity, and we do not just have to run around like crazy people trying to accomplish all the things that are set up for us to do in life. Jesus wants us to encounter and experience abiding and remaining in his presence as we go through our days.

Jesus uses that word, "abiding," ten times in this section in John. He is really trying to put in front of us, remain in me, abide in me, stay connected to the vine, be in my presence, but all of it is beautifully rooted in this idea of love. In verse 9 it says this: "as the Father has loved me, so I have loved you. Now remain in my love." This invitation to abide, to experience life with Jesus, is an invitation to remain in God's love. It goes back to this idea of identity. Who are we? We are children loved by the most high, and then think about that for a moment. God is inviting you for every moment of every day to exist in his presence and in his love.

Sometimes for me, this idea of abiding can feel a little abstract, and so I want to get really practical for a moment, and I want you to think about a day this week for one moment. I am not going to list all of them. You know the days of the week, so just pick a day. Now I want you to think about that day, whatever day is in your mind, and what it looked like as you woke up in the morning. Your alarm went off. You got a phone call about something that had to happen. Your kid jumped on you, whatever it might have been. How would that moment have changed if as you opened your eyes for the first time that morning, you were aware of God's presence in your life? I want you to think about the moment after it. Maybe you were getting ready for the day, and you were putting your makeup on, doing your hair, for those of you that still have hair, and you are figuring out what the day is going to look like. How would that moment have changed if as you looked at yourself in the mirror, you recognized God's presence with you?

Think about all of the things you had to go to. Maybe it was breakfast with your spouse. Maybe it was getting the kids to school. Maybe it was that early work meeting, whatever it might have been. How would that moment have changed if you had had awareness of God's presence in your life? I mean think about all the moments throughout the day. Maybe you thought of God before you prayed for your lunch quickly at your cubicle or whatever. How would it have changed as you went into that business meeting that you were feeling anxious about, the decision that was being made, if you knew God was with you in that moment? How would your day have changed if as you were coming home from work exhausted, and you were seeing your roommates or your family inside, and you just were thinking, "I have nothing left," if you just invited Jesus into that moment and recognized He is with you?

I think when we talk about this idea of Jesus changes everything, one of the ways that our lives can be radically changed is when we learn to abide in Jesus in every moment of every day, that Jesus wants us to experience and encounter life with Him in all of those moments, and how would our lives change if that were true of us? This idea of discipleship is not ultimately about just becoming more like Jesus and doing all of the right things. This idea of discipleship is about encountering Jesus and living life with Him. That is where real transformation and change takes place.

Dallas Willard puts it this way. He says, "The first and most basic thing we can and must do is to keep God before our mind. This is the fundamental secret of caring for our souls. Our part in this practicing

the presence of God is to direct and redirect our minds constantly to Him. In the early time of our practicing, we may well be challenged by our burdensome habits of dwelling on things less than God, but these are just habits. They are not the law of gravity, and they can be broken. A new grace-filled habit will replace the former ones as we take intentional steps toward keeping God before us, and soon our minds,” and this is my favorite part of the quote, “Soon our minds will return to God, as the needle of a compass constantly returns to the north. If God is the great longing of our souls, then He will become the polestar of our inward beings.” That is what life with Jesus looks like. That is what it means for us to abide, that we have this deep longing within our souls to experience life with Him, and as we practice the presence of God, we grow in awareness of life with Him.

Now here is the reality. I know that moments come daily that distract us from what is most important. I think of the story in Luke ten, where Jesus has an encounter with Mary and Martha. You probably are familiar with the story, but you remember the story where Jesus is coming with his disciples. They are entering this town, and they stay at the house of Mary and Martha, two sisters who are also disciples of Jesus, and the way the story goes is that as they all show up. It is a big deal. They are hosting a large crowd of people, and Martha gets all caught up in the busyness of trying to make sure everything is ready, setting the house, making sure the food is ready, and things are clean. She is the one who is like a lot of us, really good at making the checklist and making sure everything is taken care of, and as this happens, she is running around like a chicken with her head cut off trying to make sure everything is just right, and then she sees her sister Mary, who is sitting at the feet of Jesus, which is the posture of discipleship. A side note, that was a posture that in that day would have been very rare for a woman to be able to be a disciple of Jesus, and that is just Jesus encountering people and wanting women to be his disciples too, but Martha sees her sister doing that, and I am sure none of you have ever had this moment before, where you get frustrated and angry, because you are doing all the hard work, and they are just being lazy. Like I am the only one that has had that before, and so she has this moment where she sees her sister, and it finally just builds within her. The weight of it frustrates her, and she finally bursts out. She says, “Lord, don’t you care that my sister has left me to do all the work by myself? Tell her to help me.”

Now I do not know about you, but I have been in that moment before, where it just feels like pressure is building. I do not have enough time to do all of the things that are on my plate. The to-do list looms, and each unchecked box just overwhelms me and makes me feel like I am falling behind. It feels like I can’t stop to breathe, because if I stop to breathe, if I do not take care of all the details, if I allow my mind to stop racing and stop juggling all the plates that I have to do, if I just pause for one moment, then I am sure everything will fall apart. Again, just me. I am sure no one else has had that experience. I love Jesus’ response to Martha in this moment. He says, “Martha, you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed, or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.”

What does it mean to abide in Him? What does it mean to live with our focus and our attention on Jesus? It means to choose what is better, that there are many things throughout our day that we worry about, that we are anxious about, that we feel like we have to take care of, and Jesus responds to us in those moments. It is this invitation to remain in Him, to dwell in his love, to sit at the feet of Jesus as a disciple, to find our strength and our purpose and the source of life in Him.

Abiding is not about what we do for Jesus. It is about being with Him, resting in his presence, hearing his voice, and letting Him shape our hearts, and just like Martha, we face a choice. Every moment of every day we can choose what is better. It will take practice. It will not come easy for us. There will be moments when we will fail, but Jesus is always extending that invitation to us. Will we choose to remain in Him? Will we choose to find our sustenance in Him as the source of life, or will we just continue to rush around trying to produce everything on our own? Will we choose what is better? Will we choose to abide in Jesus every moment of every day? Will you pray with me?

Heavenly Father, God, this invitation to remain in your love, this invitation is an invitation to experience the presence of the living resurrected God in every moment of our days. God, when we talk about wanting to experience the change that is available to us in life, I think so much of it starts with this, understanding that you are present to us in all of the hustle and all of the chaos and all of the efforts and all of the productivity. You are calling us to a different, countercultural way of life, so we can experience life in your presence, that we are not just success machines that constantly need to be doing, but God, we are created in your image, to experience life with you. May we, like Mary, choose what is better, and as you say, that will not be taken from us, and it is in Christ's name that we pray these things, amen.

35:48 minutes

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Edited by Tom Kenaston

Message #823