

John 15:1-8
"The Branches of the Vine"
Fifth Sunday of Easter

May 2, 2021
First Lutheran Church, Glencoe, Minn.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Christ is Risen! He is Risen, Indeed! Alleluia!

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

[Intro]

Jesus said: ***"I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing"*** (John 15:5).

God's Word is full of imagery depicting the relationship between Jesus and all who are baptized into Him. There are the pictures of Jesus and His Bride, the Church; of Jesus as the head and we as His body; of Jesus the Good Shepherd and of us His sheep. In today's Gospel reading, we hear Jesus saying that He is the true Vine and we are united to Him in faith as the branches.

Now, what happens to a marriage where a husband and a wife are not united? What happens to a body that is separated from its head? What happens to the sheep without a shepherd? What happens to branches that do not remain in the Vine?

We have been united to Christ by faith, as branches to the Vine. The Vine – *Jesus* – is the source of our life and the fruit that we bear. Today on this Fifth Sunday of Easter, Jesus teaches us how we remain connected branches to the Vine as His disciples.

Jesus teaches us saying, ***"I am the true Vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit"*** (John 15:1-2).

Many of us have fertilized and pruned a variety of plants. Through this process, the plant grows and remains healthy. But what about us?

Jesus says that He is the true Vine and we are the branches. In saying this, like plants, we, too, must be fertilized and pruned.

Branches are useful in bearing fruit. Their source of energy and nourishment depends on being connected to the Vine. Even so, some branches appear connected but do not produce fruit because something is wrong with the connection. So, the vinedresser cuts off those branches.

Likewise, if the branch would lay unfertilized and unpruned, it would degenerate into a wild and unfruitful vine which would finally perish entirely. But when it is well cultivated, fertilized, pruned, and stripped of its unnecessary leaves, it develops its full strength and yields wine that is not only abundant but is also good and delicious. The question is, how are we fertilized and pruned?

[The Pruning of the Branches]

Jesus said: ***“I am the Vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”*** (John 15:5). Apart from Jesus, we can do nothing. Here Jesus is speaking of salvation. We cannot do anything apart from Jesus to inherit salvation. So, apart from Jesus, we are disconnected. As disconnected people, the only thing we can look forward to is eternal death and damnation. Now, this is nothing to look forward to.

But the triune God – the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit – wishes that everyone would be connected to Him. Like the disconnected Ethiopian Eunuch in our First Reading from Acts 8, we, too, were all once disconnected from Christ. But the Ethiopian Eunuch did not remain disconnected. You see, as soon as he was Baptized, this man was grafted into the Vine. Like you and me, this is what happened to us at our Baptism. At the font, through the water and the Word, we went from disconnected ***from*** Christ to connected ***in*** Christ. Here, through our Baptism into Christ, we became ***“a new creation”*** as branches of the Vine (2 Corinthians 5:17).

Now, as I have said many times before, baptism is not a get into heaven free card. Yes, we receive the ability to believe in Jesus as our Savior at Baptism, but we must also be pruned by God the Father – the Vinedresser.

As Jesus teaches us in the Great Commission: ***“Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you. And behold, I am with you always, to the end of the age”*** (Matthew 28:19-20).

One aspect of our pruning is part two of the Great Commission: teaching. Through the preaching of God's Word in the Divine Service, through catechism and Sunday School, we are taught the sound doctrine of God that comforts and saves. We are taught God's unchanging Truth.

Unfortunately, not everyone connected to the Vine wants to hear God's unchanging Truth. This is because our sinful nature remains. This is a constant struggle between our sinful flesh and the new man that we became when we were grafted into Christ at our Baptism.

So, instead of receiving the teaching joyfully as good branches, some become lazy Christians. They have God's Word and His pure doctrine, but they do not live-in conformity with it. Others refuse the teaching and become wild branches. Now, like all branches, some grow very large. As Martin Luther once preached on this text, *"This pruning is bad for the false branches; it frightens them. But the others, which [God the Father] He leaves on the vine, they suffer no harm when He trims them. This is to their advantage. But for the wild branches, it means being cut off and thrown into the fire"* (LW 24, 201).

These false branches are not cut immediately. Like all branches, they are baptized, they hear the Gospel, and they have the forgiveness of sins. God is always giving every branch, even the wild branch a chance to repent and become good again, since God desires the salvation of every branch.

Because of this, we must not let our judgments be determined by the size and strength of wild branches. No, our one concern must be to recognize the true branches of Christ so that we only observe who has and retains the doctrine in Scripture in its truth and purity. *"In this way,"* Luther says, *"you can see and know who are the true Christians"* (LW 24, 203).

But this demands patience and perseverance in the faith. For God does not cut off the wild branches as soon as they emerge from the stalk; He permits them to grow until it is clear what they are. For this reason, Judas Iscariot was among the apostles, heretics were among the Early Church Fathers, and heretics are still among us today.

Instead of remaining connected to the Vine, these false branches chose to split from the true doctrine of Christ and into myths. These wild branches teach from the impure heart with which they falsify and abuse Scripture. Yes, they partake of the sap of the Vine, but they do not bear fruit, but only do harm. For as soon as they get this sap, they corrupt it and turn it into deadly poison for themselves and others.

Christ says: a ***“branch cannot bear fruit by itself,”*** so ***“apart from Me you can do nothing”*** (John 15:5). So, without faith in Christ we are like a severed branch that dries up and is thrown into the fire. Without faith, it is impossible to please God (Hebrews 11:6). Without faith, our sinful human nature – *as inherited by our first parents Adam and Eve* – seeks and trusts in human help that suits our own desires and we choose to listen to what our itching ears want to hear, rather than the Truth from God’s Word (2 Timothy 4:3-5). Our sinful nature convinces many of us to trust human wisdom rather than to trust Christ. For many, instead of abiding in the Vine, we may choose to abide in earthly things for our hope and comfort. In doing so, we cut ourselves off from Jesus and become disconnected.

Another way that we are pruned is by the sinful world. Luther says that God the Father lets unbelieving leaders fertilize, prune, and trim us – *the branches* – through various persecutions, so that our faith would be strengthened. So, even when the Church is persecuted for remaining in the Vine, God will use the pruning of persecution to bring us – *His branches* – closer to Him, and so strengthen and preserve His true branches.

Likewise, many of us have gone through hardships in our lives. Many of us are going through them now. Here is yet another way God the Father prunes us, so that we can bear more fruit. Through every hardship, God the Father uses them to grow us closer to Christ, the Vine. Now, no hardship is ever fun or appealing, but God uses every hardship for our benefit, so that we would grow ever closer to Him as we trust and rely upon Him.

[Remaining Connected to the Vine]

So, how do we as branches remain connected to Christ, the Vine? We are maintained in the faith through the Means of Grace, in doing so, we remain in Christ and He remains in us. Through the Word, God the Father prunes us, and Jesus – *the Vine* – nourishes and energizes us – *the branches* – to live in faith.

Through the Word, Christ cleanses His followers as He shapes our wills to coincide with His will so that we bear much fruit and prove to be Christ's disciples. You see, God's Word – *as revealed in the Scriptures* – brings us together with Jesus and keeps us together, like a vine and branches. Through the Word, we bear fruit.

Here in the Divine Service, Christ comes to nourish us – to feed us – through His Word and Sacrament, so that we would remain connected to Him. He comes to us saying: ***“Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up on the last day. For My flesh is true food, and my blood is true drink. Whoever feeds on My flesh and drinks my blood abides in Me, and I in him”*** (John 6:54-56).

As we are fed and nourished, we receive the fruits of Christ's Cross: forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. Through this divine nourishment, we are able to bear good fruit. As branches connected to the Vine, we live through Christ and we have life through Christ. Through these Means of Grace, the Holy Spirit strengthens our faith in Jesus – *the true Vine* – who alone laid down His life for us and for our salvation, and took it up again, so that we – *by grace through faith in Him* – would remain connected to Him, the one and only true Vine.

Through being connected to Jesus – the true Vine – we produce fruit. These fruits are good works for the benefit of our neighbor. These fruits are the thoughts and actions that please God in accordance with His will and glorify Him. Apart from Jesus, we could not do any good works. So, through the Vine's Means of Grace, Jesus empowers us to confess Him as the Son of God and to live God-pleasing lives as we abide in Him and grow ever more connected to Him (1 John 4:15).

Throughout His earthly ministry, Jesus spoke various ***“I am”*** statements, so that we – *His hearers* – would have a clearer understanding on who He is and the blessings that He provides to all believers. As the true Vine, Jesus gives us – *the branches* – the victory over the power of sin, death, and Satan, and all by grace through faith in Him alone!

O Lord Jesus, help us Your branches to always remain in You, the true Vine, for in You alone, we have forgiveness, life, and salvation. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

✠ SOLI DEO GLORIA ✠