

Brody B., Emma, Isaiah, Khloe, Ivanna, Nolan, Brody W., Kryptan, Caiden, Bradley, Kyler, Jordon, Erika, and Colton: You made it! Last Wednesday evening we went into battle and you conquered all the questions I threw at you from the Small Catechism. This morning you're able to breathe a little easier and take time to soak in this very meaningful day in your life.

In a few moments you all will be coming forward to make your promises to remain faithful to your God and Savior for the rest of your life and by the power of the Holy Spirit working through His Word the Lord promises to bless you. On the day you were baptized, your parents and sponsors came forward and said, "Yes" to all the many blessings that God poured out on you that day- including the forgiveness of sins and eternal life. Today, each of you will be coming forward for yourself to say, "Yes!" to the promises of God's love for you in Christ. It's a proud moment for your parents, a proud moment for your baptismal sponsors, a proud moment for your family, and yes, a proud moment for me and all of your other instructors in the faith. You all have done extremely well, and I can honestly say I always looked forward to every Wednesday afternoon that we had together this year and I will miss that time. Each one of you has many God-given gifts and talents which have I've enjoyed seeing in our year of Catechism classes together and I look forward to seeing those gifts blossom within you in the years to come as you fulfill your promises to remain faithful to the Lord.

In today's Gospel lesson, our Lord Jesus has some very important words for you and for all of us about staying connected to Him long after this day that you make your special, public confession of faith in Him. Let's turn our attention to that right now. (pause)

Now that the weather has gotten warmer and is basically staying warm, a lot of people will soon begin to plant. Some like to plant flowers, some like to plant gardens, and of course many farmers have already begun to plant their crops for the year. In our text this morning our Lord gives us an excellent picture of planting: He talks about a Vine, some branches, and a Vinedresser or Gardener.

Back in Jesus' day growing grapes was an important line of work- it was vital to Israel's economy. Everyone knew about growing grapes, so Jesus used this as a picture to describe to people their relationship to Him, and their relationship to God the Father. Today we're going to look at this same picture, and see how **we** fit in. The question I would like for you to consider is: "What kind of branch are you?"

The picture Jesus paints is Himself as the main Vine of the vineyard, and we are the branches that grow out from Him. Now, there are different types of branches in this vineyard, and God the Father is the Gardener.

First, there are the “throw-away” branches. In verse 2, Jesus talks about how God the Father, the Gardener, cuts off or takes away every branch in Him that bears no fruit. Then in verse 6 Jesus says, “If anyone does not abide in Me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.” When a gardener is going through his vineyard, and he sees certain branches that never bear fruit, he cuts them off and throws them onto a pile, and eventually he burns that pile of dead branches. Jesus is painting a picture of people here. There are those who at one time were Christians in their lives, but then something happens to them. They stop producing fruits of faith. They stop obeying God. They stop living and talking in a Christian way. They start living and talking just like the rest of the unbelieving world. They stop producing fruits of faith in their lives.

Why does this happen to people who at one time were Christians? We find the answer in verse 6: “If anyone does not **abide (or remain)** in me ...” Jesus tells us that anyone who doesn’t continue to have contact with Him, through His Word- if that happens- at some point- we don’t know when, only God does- a person loses his faith and falls away from salvation. He stops bearing fruit and becomes a throw-away branch.

It’s important to remember that the heavenly Father, the Gardener, has made us branches of the True Vine Jesus and He’s the One who **keeps** us as living branches. It’s all His doing out of His gracious love. But we do have the ability to detach ourselves from God’s love; to cut ourselves off from the Vine to which He has connected us.

We remember that the Gardener, our heavenly Father, has grafted us on to the True Vine Jesus, through the power of His Word with the water in Holy Baptism. Before we were brought to the True Vine Jesus, we were dead and useless branches, “Dead in our trespasses and sins” is how St. Paul puts it in Ephesians 2 verse 1. But, in Holy Baptism we are made living members of our Lord Jesus. As we grow and mature, we learn about our faith and the amazing gifts the Father has given us through Jesus, and we stay connected to Him through receiving His powerful, life-giving and life-sustaining Word and Sacraments. “Apart from Me you can do nothing,” Jesus says. Apart from Him we would wither and die. We would become a “throw-away” branch.

Sadly, too often, this is what happens to many Christians. They stop producing fruits of faith. They start living like unbelievers. For some, this

begins to happen not long after they come forward to the altar and promise in their Confirmation vow that they will “hear the Word of God and receive the Lord’s Supper faithfully” and that they “intend to live according to the Word of God, and in faith, word, and deed to remain true to God, even to death.” Why does this happen to many Christians of all ages and stages in life? Why do people grow so weak in their faith or even fall away from saving faith altogether? Because they neglect the one thing needful to keep faith alive- and that is the Word of God. It’s so tempting to neglect this gift. As a result, we stop producing good works. Anyone who keeps on living this way throughout their life and does not repent is eventually picked up and thrown into the fire on Judgment Day. Remember, the question before *each* of us this morning is: “What kind of branch are you?” Are you producing the fruit of faith in your life? Or have you disconnected yourself from the Vine, Jesus?

How wonderful it is that we can go to Christ, repent of our sins, and receive His forgiveness. This is exactly what we did at the beginning of our service. Through His word of Absolution, Jesus assures you that He has forgiven you. In verse 3 of He says, “Already you are clean because of the word I have spoken to you.” You are clean, you are forgiven- because of the words Jesus Christ has spoken to you- that He has lived and died and risen- that is how He cleanses us.

But just because you are forgiven doesn't mean that God will give you an easy life. There is the second kind of branch which we need to take a look at, and that is the “Pruned branch.” Verse 2 tells us: “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.” One of the jobs of a gardener is to prune the branches on the grapevine. He cuts off the dead ones since they can be a place where bugs and diseases grow. These bugs and diseases could affect the health of the other branches connected to the Vine. The gardener also cuts a lot of living branches off of the vine. He trims them way back, and by the time he’s done, there doesn’t seem to be much left of the grapevine. All this cutting seems so drastic, so extreme, so unnecessary, but the reason the gardener does this is so that the branches can reach their full potential. Even though the branches look almost dead, months later they produce a very large crop, only because the gardener did all that cutting.

This is what God does with you. He prunes you. He cuts into your life and removes some things that you might not want removed. He takes things away from you, He changes things around for you, and sometimes, it seems so

drastic, so extreme, so unnecessary. When we're being pruned, we ask Him, "Why are You doing this to me, God?"

Although we may not always know the answer to our why questions, we can know that God only cuts into our lives for our good. He wants us to reach our full potential as His branches. He wants us to produce as many fruits of faith as possible to help those around us and to better ourselves. Maybe you're going through the pruning process right now. When that happens, we trust that God is in control, because the Gardener does know exactly what He is doing.

The goal is that each of us becomes a "fruitful branch." That is the third of the four vine branches that we're looking at this morning. In verse 8, Jesus says, "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." The fruitful Christian is one whose life is filled with good works. These good works first of all include obedience to God- doing what God wants, even when the rest of the world is doing something different. Good works include the way you treat other people- the people at home- your family, the people at school, at work, your friends, even total strangers. When you're around these people, you ask yourself, how can I serve them? How can I show the love of God to this person? How can I witness Christ to someone else? "By this my Father is glorified," Jesus says, "that you bear much fruit."

All of us would like to be fruitful branches, but how does this happen? How can you become even *more* fruitful in your life? By staying connected to the vine. That is the fourth branch to look at this morning, "the connected branch." Look at verse 4, "Abide in me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in me." No one can truly be a "good person" in the eyes of God unless he or she remains in Christ, someone who has regular contact with Christ will produce much fruit in his life. When you remain in Him, He promises you that you will bear much fruit.

There is only one way to maintain that connection with Christ, and you're doing it right now- by having regular contact with God's Word, and regular contact with the Lord's Supper- that's how you remain in Christ, and how He remains in you. Jesus tells you, "Apart from Me you can do nothing." He provides the power you need in your life to produce fruits of faith, in His Word & Sacraments.

So, what kind of branch are you? Really, if we take God's Word to heart, we're all four, the throw-away branch, the pruned branch, the fruitful branch, and the connected branch. We repent of those times we have been throw-away

branches. We're thankful that Jesus has forgiven us. Although it is painful, we are thankful that God prunes us. We're thankful that God produces fruits of faith in our lives. And we're thankful that Jesus remains in us, and keeps us as connected branches through His Word and Sacrament. So that we will bear much fruit to the glory of God.

Brody B., Emma, Isaiah, Khloe, Ivanna, Nolan, Brody W., Kryptan, Caiden, Bradley, Kyler, Jordon, Erika, and Colton: Your parents, your sponsors, your family and friends are here for you, today and always to support you in your faith; to help make sure you remain a connected branch. And it is my heartfelt prayer that you do remain faithful to God and remain connected to Him through His Word your whole life through until life everlasting in heaven. Amen!