

NEW BEGINNINGS LUTHERAN CHURCH

Fifth Sunday of Easter – April 28th, 2024 (11:11 am)

ABIDING

Psalm 150
Acts 8:26-40
1 John 4:1-11
John 15:1-8

Jesus Christ Is the True Vine Who Bears Much Fruit in Us

“God is love,” and He has manifested Himself to us by sending “his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him” (1 John 4:9, 16). By the ministry of the Gospel, “he has given us of his Spirit,” so that we also believe and confess “that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh.” In this way, we “abide in him and he in us,” and we “love one another” (1 John 4:2, 7, 13). Such divine love is exemplified in Philip’s preaching of “the good news about Jesus” to the Ethiopian eunuch. And when “they came to some water,” the eunuch was baptized into the very Gospel that Philip had preached (Acts 8:35–38). That Ethiopian was thereby grafted into “the true vine,” Jesus Christ (John 15:1), just as we are. Already we are clean because of the Word that Christ has spoken to us and by the washing of water with His Word. We now abide in Him by faith in His forgiveness. As He abides in us, both body and soul, with His own body and His blood, He “bears much fruit” in us (John 15:3–5).

A missionary in Africa lived in his Mission’s Central Office, which had a small generator to supply power to the temple and to his house. Some natives from an outlying mission came to visit him. They noticed the electric light hanging from the ceiling of his living room. They watched wide-eyed as he turned the little switch and the light went on.

One of the visitors asked if he could have one of the bulbs. The missionary, thinking he wanted it for a sort of trinket, gave him an extra bulb. One day, on a visit, the missionary pastor stopped at the hut of the man who had asked for the bulb. Imagine his surprise when he saw the bulb hanging from an ordinary string. He explained then to him that one had to have electricity and a wire to bring the power to the bulb¹.

We may laugh at the innocence of an African native, but we may not be much better. In another case, if the wi-fi or internet was not good here in the church, you won't be able to what our broadcast today. We would lose the connection. Also, I think of those who are camping and don't have electricity or another source of power. *If you don't connect with an energy source, you have troubles or at least big challenges, right?*

In our text today, we heard Jesus telling a story about the importance of such connections to the source of power. His analogy used the farm imagery of the vine and the branches. For those of us who did not grow up on the farm, we may be more familiar with the image of electricity and the bulb. Just as electricity provides the power necessary for the bulb to burn, the vine offers the essential life for the branches to produce fruit. But we should never forget the great contrast between a living thing and an electro-mechanical thing.

Our text for today has three primary messages on which we can focus. First, it mentions **pruning**, then **fruit-bearing**, and finally, it emphasizes **abiding - staying connected**.

PRUNING

¹ Msgr. Arthur Tonne, Five-Minute Homilies on the Gospels of Cycles A,B,C (Hillsboro KS: Multi-Business Press 1977) pg. 86. Quoted in a sermon by Jerry Fuller posted on PRCL. May 17, 2000.

It was interesting for me to notice that the text talks about pruning right off the bat. Verse two says, **“Every branch in me that doesn’t bear fruit, he takes away.”** What shall we say about this pruning?

Jesus says that God prunes the branches that bear fruit to make it bear more fruit. Vines left to themselves will sprawl out all over the place and produce huge canopies of shoots, leaves and branches, and unless that canopy is controlled, the vine won’t yield much fruit.

Pruning is a counter-intuitive activity because all those leaves suggest that what you’ve got here is a very healthy vine, when in fact, it may be all just showing off with nothing actually happening and not saying anything. Jesus is afraid that the disciples might face this same problem. He wasn’t interested in showy disciples any more than he is interested in striking churches and showy Christians today. What he is interested in is fruit.

It is important to remove suckers. A sucker is a branch that usually grows in the fork of the main trunk and a fruit-producing branch. According to this farming explanation, the new branch will not produce fruit. It will only sap the resources from the fruit-producing branch. So, to have a better crop, the vinedresser is instructed to remove the suckers. We should note that pruning is not really a punishment, but so the plant can be even more fruitful. Pruning sounds destructive, but it is creative.

Similarly, I believe God prunes our lives to shape us into the image of Jesus Christ. Sometimes pruning involves removing sin from our lives. And sometimes God’s pruning is painful, but God is changing us to look more like Jesus over time.

There is one crucial thing we need to notice about this pruning. You can look at a hundred vines, and you will never see one branch pruning another branch! It seems to me that the job of pruning, shaping and otherwise trimming those vines must be the job of someone besides the branches themselves. That responsibility is left to God. We are amateurs. We don’t know how to do the job right, so we should leave it to God.

So, it is good news that Jesus is the True Vine, The Father is the vinedresser, and we are the branches.

FRUIT-BEARING

What is the fruit? I struggled with this part of Jesus’ analogy for some time. Many people suggest that fruit-bearing means leading other people to Jesus Christ.

Then I turned my thoughts to Paul’s listing of the fruit of the Spirit in Galatians 5:22-23: **“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control; against such things, there is no law.”**

If we look at the context, we will find better clues. Verse 12 says, **“This is my commandment, that you love one another, even as I have loved you.”** The whole paragraph that follows our text for today is about abiding in love, the kind of love that Jesus showed to us.

It seems that Jesus is saying once again that we should emulate the character of Jesus, and especially his love. A branch should have the same DNA as the trunk. If God is love, then we should so love. In other words, if we have faith, consequently, we love and do good works.

ABIDING

Jesus’ third point concerns ABIDING. The word “abide” or “staying connected” is repeated many times in this little story, so it must be very important.

We need to develop constant contact with God and His Sacraments. The Word of God and His Sacraments are the key to stay connected with Jesus - The Vine. The Christian life is about entering into a relationship with the Christian main features (Word and Sacraments), the risen living Christ. And Christian lives out their relationship with God within the framework of the Christian tradition (Word and Sacraments).

The biblical image of a vine conveys a deep sense of the connectedness of our lives. The real measure of our lives is not so much what we believe but to whom we are connected. The better we are connected, the more we are remembered, transformed and propelled to love.

Such transformation and motivation come from connectedness, not from effort. Suppose someone were to walk up to one of those vines and yell, "START PRODUCING FRUIT!" *Nothing would happen, isn't it?* Once the vinedressers have done their jobs, all the branches have to do to bear fruit is to stay connected to the vine.

About abiding in Christ, we could think about it this way: *It's like you're trying to catch a plane. You're late. You hop in your car and speed to the airport. You reach the parking lot, grab your stuff and race down the corridor to get to the correct gate. You rush onto the plane, flop down in your seat, and heave a sigh of relief. You made it. In one sense, you've reached your destination. Then the plane takes off, and you're on your way to other places, going higher, faster than ever before, but now you are not frantic or worried because you are in with the airplane travel. You are connecting. That's what it means to have faith in Christ. You are abiding in Christ.*

Our prayer is that you keep this connection through the Word of God and Sacraments.

Our prayer is that you will continue to be transformed by God, day by day and, consequently, loving your neighbor and serving society.

Our prayer is that you keep this faith alive.

Our prayer is that you keep the faith connected with the true Vine – Jesus Christ. Amen.