

John 15:1-8

“Staying Connected to the Vine”
Fifth Sunday of Easter (B)

April 28, 2024

Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

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).

It’s officially spring! I don’t know about what you’ve been up to, but in my free time, I have been preparing my lawn to be mowed. And it sure has been blustery lately. So, I have been raking those leaves that blew over from our neighbor’s yards. But I haven’t been only raking, as I have been playing the age-old game “pick-up sticks.”

For each stick that I picked up, I am reminded that they are good for very little, except for maybe being added to a burn pile, since they are no longer connected to the tree. And even if I buried that stick in the ground, it could never become a tree again. It’s dead.

Today, on this Fifth Sunday of Easter, Jesus focuses us on Himself as the true and living vine, as He says, **“Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit”** (John 15:5a).

Last Sunday, Jesus referred to Himself as the Good Shepherd and to us as His sheep. Today, we hear Him calling Himself the Vine and us “the branches.” Jesus uses imagery, such as this, to build us up and to announce how dearly He loves us. Terms such as sheep and branches show our purpose in life, as His beloved people.

Jesus calls us “branches.” As a branch, this shows us a sense of connectedness, a unity that now exists when we are living our lives as *part* of Christ rather than *apart* from Him. Apart from being connected to the Vine, a branch can do nothing.

Just as a branch that is removed from the vine or tree soon withers and dies, so we have no life apart from Jesus, the true Vine. Surely, we can claim to be Christians and tout our church membership or show our confirmation certificate, but apart from the life-giving nourishment of God’s grace in Jesus Christ – the true Vine, we cannot live or bear any fruit.

If we neglect our fertilization through Word and Sacrament, we become much like our lawns and gardens that without fertilization, they dry up, go limp, lose color, and eventually wither and die. So, those who continue to live apart from the Vine, who do not gladly hear, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest His Word and receive His Sacraments, are like withered branches that are of no use other than to be picked up and thrown into the fire.

Like plants, we too, need nourishment! And as I said last week, sheep need a shepherd to lead them to food, since they cannot feed themselves. In a like way, our Good Shepherd, the true Vine, provides nourishment for us through His Means of Grace – His Word and Sacraments. We become “in Christ,” through our Baptism into Christ. In Baptism, the triune God washes away all of our sins. There, we are crucified with Christ and rise again with Him to newness of life. It is through regular attendance in the Divine Service that the Holy Spirit feeds us forgiveness, life, and salvation.

For those who separate themselves from the Means of Grace, we, who are in the Vine, ought to pray for them and reach out to them, since apart from the true Vine, we only wither and die.

But connected to the Vine, the branches live! You see, the sap that flows from the Vine nourishes the branches. Our very lives sprout from God, who created us, but so often we cut ourselves off from the source of life. Yet, by His grace through the spilled blood of His Son, shed on the cross for the sins of the world, we have been reconciled to God the Father.

As branches, through Christ’s atoning death and bodily resurrection, we have been grafted back into the true Vine. The life that flows from the side of the Crucified and Resurrected One now nourishes us with His life and forgiveness, so that by grace through faith in the true Vine, we might live in union with Him.

Unfortunately, not everyone connected to the true Vine wants to hear God’s unchanging Truth. As Christians, we are always simultaneously saint and sinner. And because our sinful nature remains, there is a constant battle between our sinful flesh and the new man that we became when we were grafted into Christ at your Baptism.

So, instead of receiving the teaching joyfully as good branches, some branches become lazy. Yes, they have God's Word and His pure doctrine, but they refuse to live in conformity with it. They refuse Christ's teaching and become wild branches. For these wild branches who claim to be Christians but refuse to live out the Christian faith, when they are pruned by God the Father, the Vinedresser, the pruning frightens them, since they don't want to repent of their sins. They would rather just go through the motions of the Divine Service and then live their life no different than a heathen.

Now, God the Father could just cut off these wild branches immediately, but He doesn't. He doesn't because He is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. Like their fellow branches, these wild branches are baptized, they hear the Gospel, and they have the forgiveness of sins. The Vinedresser, God the Father, is always giving every branch – *even hypocritical branches* – a chance to repent and become good again, since He desires the salvation of every branch. But there will come a time when His steadfast love comes to an end. For those wild branches, this means being cut off and thrown into the fire.

For good branches, this demands patience and perseverance in the faith. For the Vinedresser does not cut off the wild branches as soon as they emerge from the stalk. No, He permits them to grow until it is clear what they are. This is why Judas Iscariot was among the apostles. For this reason, heretics are among us today teaching us that salvation is your work, not God's; teaching us that that the Sacrament of the Altar is not the Body and Blood of Jesus, but instead only a symbolic meal; teaching us that what really matters is your heart's desire, so you be you in your self-centered pride.

Again, we must distinguish what is good, right, and salutary from all those loud and alluring voices of lies and deceit. Without Christ as the true Vine connecting us to Himself through His Word and Sacraments, we would all wither and die.

Elsewhere in Matthew 7, Christ, our true Vine, says, "***You will recognize them by their fruits***" (Matthew 7:16, 20). So, by the nourishment the true Vine provides, the branches bear fruit. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, St. Paul speaks of these fruits as the fruit of the Spirit: "***Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, [and] self-control***" (Galatians 5:22-23). These are all the characteristics of the true Vine, our Savior Jesus Christ in His relationship with us. He is perfectly loving of us; He rejoices over us; He is patient, kind and good to us.

However, the opposite is true of those branches that chose to fall off the true Vine, or even those wild branches that remain on the Vine. St. Paul writes, ***“Now the works of the flesh are evident: sexual immorality, impurity, sensuality, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, fits of anger, rivalries, dissensions, divisions, envy, drunkenness, orgies, and things like these. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God”*** (Galatians 5:19-21). This is a warning from love. Again, God desires all to be saved, but if one continues in such sins without repentance, you will not inherit the kingdom of God, but instead be like dead branches that are ***“gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned”*** (John 15:6).

As Christians, who are connected to the true Vine, we are to bear fruit. Again, ***“You will recognize them by their fruits”*** (Matthew 7:16, 20). So, by being loving, patient, and kind to us, Jesus the true Vine creates in us the same fruit of the Spirit. Connected to the true Vine, we become loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful, gentle, and self-controlled.

As we are pruned and watered by God’s Means of Grace, He produces good, sweet fruit not just for our benefit, but for the benefit of our neighbor. You see, Jesus makes us His branches through His Words, and we in turn reveal that we are His branches through our fruit – *our attitudes, our words, our actions*. So, knowing Jesus and living in Him affects how we talk about others, where we go, what we do with our time, how we spend our money. As branches connected to the true Vine, we live with purpose and in hope that is sure and certain. Those who are not connected to the true Vine will wonder why we are a little different from them. We can say that we are different because we are connected to the Savior Jesus Christ, who suffered, died and rose to forgive their sins, too!

Christ is the true Vine and we are His branches. He daily nourishes and strengthens us with the forgiveness of sins He earned for us on the Cross. He died, so that we would have life. He rose, so that we would flourish. As long as we are connected to Him, we have an abundant and never-ending source of life. ***Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen, indeed! Alleluia!*** Amen.

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

+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +