

Fifth Sunday of Easter May 2 2021

John 15:1-8

I am, most certainly, not a gardener. I don't have the patience or attention to detail required. I grew up around gardening though. I remember my mother and father having a small garden plot in the back yard for some years and my mother worked on her rose bushes and azaleas. About the only time I tried my hand at growing something was for a science experiment in Junior High to see what effect earthworms and fertilizer had on the growth of bean sprouts I think it was.

While watering plants, cutting the grass, and trimming are more my speed, I do know enough about how things grow to get the sense of the metaphor Jesus uses in our text today. It is one that I think most of us can grasp at least in general.

Jesus says, I am the true vine, my Father is the vine grower, and you are the branches.

In this one sentence, we get a glimpse of the intertwined and unique relationship between Jesus and God the Father, which then carries over into this mysterious but essential relationship Jesus has with the church. It's similar to the language Paul uses of the church being the Body of Christ. Both of these metaphors make clear to us the deep inter-relationship between us and Jesus, even more the utter dependence that we have on Christ who is Head and Vine. Who is the source of direction, sustenance, and energy for us. Who if we are cut off from we will die, just as a branch that is cut off from the vine will wither and die.

As branches, abiding, remaining with, staying connected to Jesus is not just essential but necessary to be fruitful in life, John says. At least with the fruit Jesus

calls us to bear. This is the same fruits of the Spirit; Paul in Galatians lays out for us- the first of which is love. Love expressed to our neighbors, to those in need around us. The promise of Jesus is that if we abide in him, we will be fruitful! But without Jesus the Vine, apart from him, we the branches can produce nothing. The term used here is a powerful negative that leaves no exceptions. There is no wiggle room. Apart from Jesus even something we might think is good fruit is nothing.

A recent study shows less than half the US population is affiliated with a church, synagogue, or mosque. This is down from almost 75% in the 1940's. Almost 1/3 of those in the US describe themselves as religiously unaffiliated, as not even mentally connecting themselves to any religion at all.

So, despite the newest hot church plants happening in downtown Cedar Rapids. Despite children's ministry, latest music, coolest graphics and online presence. Despite all the things we do as church, fewer people are claiming even an informal connection with the Vine- Jesus. Why is that?

As Christians who happen to be Lutheran, we have a particular affinity for the relationship John lays out in this text. Expressed in Luther's explanation of the Third Article of the Creed, we believe it is the Holy Spirit working through the Gospel the Word of God that not only brings us to faith but makes anything we do fruitful. In the language of this metaphor, the sap that runs through the Vine is the Holy Spirit and it comes to us, we believe, through the proclamation of the Word that is first and foremost embodied in Jesus Christ. A Word that is written in Scripture, that is spoken and proclaimed in the mutual conversation of the saints- those who are followers of Jesus. In sermons, and discussions around

scripture and faith. We believe it is the Holy Spirit that comes to us in and through the Word that calls us to faith, pulls us branches together and attaches us to the Vine, and it is the vital nourishment of the Holy Spirit flowing through that Vine who invigorates us to produce fruit.

If this is true, and we with all our music, and graphics, and ministry are proclaiming the gospel, the Word of God, then the Holy Spirit will be at work and we should see growth. Not just in numbers but most importantly in spiritual depth and commitment. But according to these statistics we aren't. Why not?

To my mind, there were 3 possible reasons this might be true. First, that Jesus is still in the tomb and this whole Christianity thing is a fraud. Second, that like our Calvinist siblings in Christ are correct and what we are seeing is a falling away of those who are not among the elect as the societal pressures and benefits to religious affiliation disappear. Third, that we haven't been proclaiming the true Gospel all these years.

I reject the first possibility. I have seen the risen Jesus and felt the work of the Holy Spirit in my life, the life of my family and too many other people who I trust. The second has some truth to it. There is empirically less social value to being connected with any religion, much less Christianity, than any time in the last 100 years. But, based on our beliefs, the third reason seems the most likely.

We have not been proclaiming the Gospel, but something else. That despite all our activity and energy and investment, we have been trying to produce something on our own and it has ultimately yielded... nothing. If we have not been proclaiming the Gospel, it means that we have cut ourselves off from the

true Vine. Jesus. The one who is the only source to be able to produce fruit and who is the only reason we can have life itself.

As individuals, this means we don't trust Jesus to save us. We think there is something we can do to save this world, ourselves! If we just work harder, use more tech, use our brains. It means we trust ourselves more than God.

As a Church, this means we don't trust the power of that message of the Good News of God embodied by Jesus Christ. We don't trust that the Holy Spirit can act through that old thing. We think we need to add something to it. Punch it up. Make it relevant. Smooth it out to appeal to people. When we do that, as individuals or as a community, we ultimately produce... nothing. Because the branch cannot bear fruit itself. It needs the Vine.

The good news of God in Jesus Christ is this, that God so loved the world that God sent God's only son Jesus into the world not to condemn it, but to save it. That the message proclaimed by Jesus was so challenging and scary to us that humans killed him for it. And that in the resurrection God shows us not only God's power even over death, but God's love for us. Nothing will stand between God and God's beloved creation- us.

What Jesus calls us to can feel scary- denial of self, focus on loving kindness to our neighbors, even those who hate us. A life lived trusting that God will provide what we need. That even what we have in this world is ultimately Gods. But the promise is that when we follow Jesus, we will have a life that is fuller and more abundant than anything else we could create ourselves.

Jesus says, when you trust in me. Stay intimately connected with me and my Word, receive the life giving Holy Spirit, anything that you intend or resolve to do, coming out of that abiding, will be done for all of you. Why? Because that desire or intent will have come from God. Because it is based on trust in God, not us. Talk about bearing fruit!

And I'm willing to bet, that just the process of dwelling, staying in close proximity to that Word- will lead to the growth of God's church- in numbers but also in faithfulness. It can't help it. Why, because the Holy Spirit will be at work in and through what we do and say, and the Holy Spirit is how God transforms people. Just look at what happened with the Ethiopian eunuch. One chariot ride with Philip and he was ready to be baptized.

As we begin to emerge from this pandemic, in our eagerness to return, let us take some time to stop and think about what it is we are returning to. Do those things we used to do help us abide, dwell, hang out with God's Word embodied in Jesus? Are these things essential to helping us bear fruit?

A branch cannot survive if it is only connected to the Vine one day out of seven, can it? To bear fruit, the branch needs daily nourishment and support from the Vine. How do we include a daily dose of the Word in our lives? Daily prayer, scripture reading (even a 3-5 minute devotional), listening to a podcast or a sermon while we walk. What are the things that we as the corporate church can do to help you as individual members of the Body of Christ bear more fruit?

Friends in Christ- The life of a branch is not an easy one. Jesus promises that we will have tribulation. Storm and disease will try and attack us. To produce good

fruit we will need to have our lives pruned, things will be stripped away so that our time and energy can go into producing good fruit, not something else.

But in the end- what else is there? For apart from Christ there is no life. Physical strength fades, intelligence dims, jobs end, money runs out and you can't take it with you. The only thing that has laughed in the face of death and lived to tell the tale is Jesus Christ. In him alone do we find meaning and purpose. In him alone do we find life worth living. In him alone are we saved.

As spring brings forth new growth in this gift of God that surrounds us, may we cling to the true Vine that is Jesus and invigorated by the Holy Spirit bring forth the fruit we have already received- the abundant love and mercy of God for all people.