

UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL

April 29, 2018

Easter 5

John 15:1-8

“I am the Vine, you are the branches”.

Dear Friends in Christ,

Spring is the time of the year when a lot of people like to make use of their binoculars. Binoculars are especially good to take with you on a visit to the park or on a trip in the country. Looking through them you can see up close many of the wonders of God’s creation — the birds building nests in the trees, squirrels playing in the grass, rabbits chopping off your tulips. Those things which are far away can be examined up close through binoculars.

Now, if I were to focus these binoculars on you, you might begin to feel a bit uncomfortable. People don’t like being examined up close. Maybe you would feel better if I turned them around. Then you would appear much farther away. A lot of people like to think of God as being far away — distant and far removed from their daily lives. In fact, there’s even a religious philosophy, called Deism, which pictures God as having created the world and then removed and isolated himself from it. In fact, there are a lot of Deists around today — people who are uncomfortable with the idea of a God who is close at hand and intimately concerned about their lives.

But the god of the Deists is not the God of the Bible. The true God is the Triune God — God the Father who created the world and sustains it by His awesome power — God the Son, the Good Shepherd who came to seek and to save the lost by laying down His life for the sheep — and God the Holy Spirit who strengthens and empowers His Church, through Word and Sacraments, to produce the fruits of faith which are so necessary if we are to be the blessing to others that God has called us to be. This is the God of the Scriptures — a God who is close at hand, working to strengthen and sustain His people, to comfort them in their afflictions, to help them overcome temptations and to encourage them to greater faith and obedience.

Another aspect of the nearness of God is spoken of in our text for today. God is like a vine dresser, Jesus says, who goes out to examine His vineyard close up — to tend to the branches, inspecting them to see if they are bearing good fruit. And the question we should be considering today is: How am I bearing up under the close inspection and scrutiny of God? Am I bearing the good fruit of faith, or have I grown cold and lifeless, a worthless branch destined for the flame of destruction?

The image of the vine and the vineyard is an image that was deeply rooted in the history of God’s people, Israel. The vine was the emblem of the Jewish nation, just as the Maple Leaf is an emblem of Canada. In the time of Jesus the temple of Herod was decorated with a great golden vine. And it was the hopes and dreams of wealthier Jewish families to be able to provide a gold leaf or a branch that could be added to that vine. In that symbolic way, each family could claim its connection to that vine of God’s planting — the children of Israel.

The Old Testament Prophets were aware of the deep symbolism of the vine. And when they wanted to speak out against the sin and corruption of the people, they made use of this image. Jeremiah declares: "Yet I planted you a choice vine, wholly of pure seed. How then have you turned degenerate and become a wild vine?" Ezekiel expresses a similar thought: "your mother was like a vine in the vineyard transplanted by the water, fruitful and full of branches...but now it is transplanted in the wilderness, in a dry and thirsty land." And perhaps the most touching description of all is from the prophet Isaiah who says: "My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill. He dug it up and cleared it of stones and planted it with the choicest vines. He built a watch tower in it and cut out a wine press as well. Then he looked for a crop of good grapes, but it yielded only wild grapes."

Even then, in Old Testament times, God, the owner of the vineyard, was examining His people, looking for a rich and full harvest of good fruit. But it was altogether lacking. And when Jesus says: "I am the true vine", what He is really saying is "I am the true Israel — the Israel God intended — the true planting of God — I am the vine that has grown healthy and strong, that accomplishes the will of its planter by producing a rich harvest of good fruit." In this vine, Jesus Christ, there is life and salvation. In this vine there is goodness and joy. In this vine there is peace with God and life-giving, fruit-producing power.

And then turning to His disciples, and to you and me, He says: "You are the branches." "I am the Vine and you are the branches and as long as you abide in me things will be the way they should. My joy will be in you and your joy will be full and overflowing." Is your life filled with joy? Is it overflowing with the fruits of God's Spirit?

What does the vine-dresser find when He examines your life? He comes to look up close for two things. First of all, he comes to look for broken and severed branches. Jesus says: "Every branch of mine that bears no fruit, he takes away...If a man does not abide in me, he is cast forth as a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire and burned." "Apart from me, you can do nothing." Jesus is sounding a warning here about trying to produce an effective Christian life without and apart from a close and abiding relationship with Him. Not only is it difficult to live a good life apart from Christ, it is impossible. "Without faith", the Bible says, "it is impossible to please Him." (Hebrews 11:6) Faith is a precious gift of God the Holy Spirit, and it is nurtured and nourished by Christ Himself. It is the connection of faith that makes the fruit good, for apart from Him we can do nothing.

Your life as a Christian is continually nourished and fed by Jesus Christ the true vine. How? Does Jesus feed you through some invisible feeding tube you can't see? No. The way you are fed is by coming to Church, hearing the Gospel and tasting the Gospel in the Lord's Supper. It's that simple. Faith clings to Jesus Christ as you receive Him in the Word and Sacraments. That is concrete and practical. If you fail to hear the message of the Gospel again and again and again, you cut yourself off from Jesus and from faith itself. So why do we go to Church? We go to Church to get fed – to receive the food of life.

I guess that's why I'm always amazed at people that make going to Church an optional or occasional thing — something to do if there isn't anything else to do that morning. Jesus Himself says, If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. It just isn't enough to say I read the Bible at home, or I worship at the park or on the boat or at the beach. Remember

our lesson from Acts. The Ethiopian eunuch couldn't understand the message of the Scriptures until someone preached to Him. Or remember our lesson from Luke 24 a couple weeks ago. Jesus' disciples couldn't even understand the message until He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. As Saint Paul says in Romans 10, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ." Faith is not a one-time event that we got at Baptism.

You see, faith must be nourished and strengthened continually by the Word and Sacraments; that's why Jesus in our text uses the word "remain" so often. It could also be translated "abide" or "dwell". When Jesus dwells in us and we in Him, then and only then can we bear fruit in our lives. If someone's life is not bearing the fruit of the Gospel, the problem is that they are not hearing the Gospel in faith. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine.

The second thing the gardener looks for are healthy branches that are in need of pruning. Jesus says: "every branch of mine that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." You need to understand something about horticulture to really appreciate what Jesus is saying. In a vineyard, new grape vines are not permitted to bear any grapes for at least three years. Each year the branches are pruned so severely that no grapes could possibly grow. The reason for that is so that the root system of the plant will grow deep into the soil. In some areas of the world, the roots of a vine reach down to 100 feet or more.

The point Jesus is making here is that troubles and adversity in our lives have a way of driving our roots of faith deeper — so that we will be firmly grounded and established in God's Word. This pruning is the trials and struggles in our lives. Why do bad things happen to good people? Why do tragedies and heartaches happen to Christians? Doesn't God love us? If God really loves me, why do these things keep happening to me? Everyone has things happen in their life that are hard to understand. They may be big problems, they may be little, but they all make us ask questions about God and why He lets these things happen to us. It's a good question.

Jesus gives us a simple answer, but a deep one that is hard to understand. Jesus says that the trials and struggles in our lives are God pruning us so that we may bear good fruit in our lives. Martin Luther on this text calls these trials and struggles the manure and pruning clippers of our lives. If you were a branch of a vine, you must admit that there are things that would happen to you that would be hard to understand. Why does the gardener keep cutting off my limbs and branches? Why does the gardener keep piling manure up all around me? It stinks and I don't like it! So why does the gardener do these things? The gardener does these things because He knows what is best for the vine and its branches. The gardener knows that too many limbs will choke the fruit, and that the vine must be fertilized in order to grow and be fruitful.

Now we're not talking about plant life here. We're talking about you. God uses the lousy things that happen in your life to prune you so that you may bear more fruit. He uses the trials and struggles of this life so that you may see Jesus all the clearer. He fertilizes your life with the junk of this world, even the things that we know are gross and wrong, but God uses them for good. Perhaps you remember the story of Joseph in Genesis 50. Joseph's brothers had sold him into slavery so that they could be rid of him. But Joseph ended up ruling over them. As Joseph said, As for you, you meant evil; but God meant it for good.

Perhaps another example is in order. One of the earliest Christian martyrs was a man named Ignatius, a disciple of the apostle John. Ignatius was arrested and taken to Rome to be torn apart by wild beasts in the arena. When this was about to happen, Ignatius said, "Let them come! I am God's kernel of grain. He must crush and grind me in the mill before He can use me." Now this is a very different way of looking at Christian suffering. Certainly, it is horrible that wild beasts killed Ignatius. But Ignatius, in faith, could see that God would use these terrible events to serve as a witness to the Gospel. As Luther put it, "Ignatius looks upon the terrible teeth of the wild lions and bears as nothing else than God's millstone with which he must be ground to powder in order that he may be prepared as a good cake for God."

That is how God works in your life. God loves you and wants what is best for you. He takes all of the evil and horrible things that Satan and the world will throw against you, He takes all of that, and God uses it to your eternal welfare. He prunes you so that you may be fragrant and a fruitful branch of the vine, Jesus Christ. Amazing, isn't it? Only God can turn the worst things in our life and use them for our good.

May each of us be renewed today by God the Holy Spirit to abide in Christ and to bear out in our lives the fruits of faith that He would work in us to the glory of God. Then we need not be afraid of having God examine our lives close up. For, when He comes to look at you and me, He doesn't look at us through binoculars or telescopes, but through the life and death of His beloved Son. By his death we are cleansed of sin and by His resurrection we are set free to be strong, fruit-producing branches of our Lord Jesus Christ. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.