

“Abide in the Vine”

Easter 5

April 28, 2024

John 15:1-8

“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.

Dear Friends in Christ Jesus,

“Stay where you are!” “Don’t move!” These commands sound rather restrictive. They are imperatives that can sound oppressive and limiting, like we’re being told what to do – and what we are being told is to not do anything. The idea of remaining where you are sounds kind of boring, like we’re stuck in a rut. But when it comes to the Christian life, nothing could be further from the truth. Far from being dull and lifeless, for the Christian, remaining where you are – that is, “abiding in the vine,” remaining connected to Christ – is, in fact, dynamic, active, and **very** productive. And so our theme this morning: “Abide in the Vine.”

What I’m referring to is the Holy Gospel for today, from John 15. There Jesus says: “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.”

“I am the vine; you are the branches,” says our Lord. Here, my friends, is your basic identity. There is so much confusion about identity today. Who am I? Where do I belong? Which pronoun should I use to identify myself? Am I a man or a woman, a boy or a girl? My friends, Jesus gives you your identity, and it is in relation to him.

In this text, in the space of just eight verses, Jesus refers to himself with words like “I” or “me” at least a dozen times. Likewise, he uses the word “you” at least a dozen times. The point is clear: It is this “I - you” relationship that Jesus establishes with you – this is what gives you your basic identity in life.

Is this how you see yourself? Each one of us has many identities in life. Many of them are defined by our relationship to others: teacher, student; employer, employee; husband, wife; parent, child. But first and foremost is your identity formed by your relationship to Christ. You are a Christian. In Holy Baptism you were united to Christ. You have been joined to Jesus. Now your life is linked to his.

Jesus gives you your identity. And here’s what he says it is: “You are the branches.” In a vineyard, branches are defined by their connection to the vine. Jesus is the vine, and so your identity is defined by your connection to Christ. And it is in that relationship – but only in that relationship of branches connected to the vine – that you will bear fruit in your life. That is what naturally happens when branches abide in the vine. They bear fruit.

Fruitful branches. That is who we are now in Christ. But that’s not who we were before, apart from Christ. Apart from him, we were fruitless, faithless, and lifeless. But it was for dead ones like us that Christ came. For us he himself died, and then rose again. By his death he destroyed death and cleanses us from our sins. By his Easter victory, he assures us of new life, eternal life. Jesus is the true

vine, the living vine, who gives life to the branches. He sustains our life and causes us to be fruitful. We are fruitful as we remain connected and continue to draw our life from him. So Christ gets the credit for any good fruit we bear in our lives.

And so now, in Christ, connected to him and drawing your life from him, you will bear fruit. Much fruit, good fruit. What is this “fruit” that we’re speaking of? The fruit of faith consists in all the good works that we Christians do, according to the Ten Commandments, for the glory of God and the good of our neighbor. Love and good works—that’s the fruit that you will bear.

Now make no mistake: Good works won’t save you, any more than bearing fruit causes a branch to become attached to a vine. It’s the other way around. The branch cannot bear fruit independently and thereby earn its way onto the vine. No, the branch is attached to the vine, and that is why and how it bears fruit. It’s like what St. Paul says in Ephesians 2: “For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.”

So what’s the secret to bearing fruit, to doing good works? Simple. Do nothing. Remain where you are. Abide in the vine, and you will bear much fruit. Oh, when I say, “Do nothing,” please understand: You will be doing plenty of things. But as far as your power source for doing all those good works, the secret is to do nothing other than what you are doing here today: abiding in the vine, remaining connected to Christ – letting Christ’s word and Spirit strengthen and empower you. The secret to being a fruitful branch is really no secret at all. Christian fruitfulness comes from abiding in the vine. Jesus says: “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.”

Notice the only imperative, the only command word, in this passage is “Abide!” -- not “Bear fruit.” Jesus does not say, “Bear fruit for me” or “You must bear fruit.” No, his command is this: “Abide in me, remain connected to me.” You see, it is absolutely imperative – it is vital – that we abide in the vine. If we become detached from Christ, then we cut ourselves off from the only source of life there is, both for our own eternal life and for our ability in this life to produce the fruit of love for others. But as we do abide in Christ the vine, in vital connection with him, then we will continue to be nourished with an abundant source of life and fruitfulness.

Friends, Christ supplies you with all you need to bear abundant fruit. So the question becomes: How does he do it? He does it through the gospel, the good news of God’s grace in Christ. The gospel is the “juice of life” for us, flowing from the vine into the branches. The gospel refreshes our soul. It strengthens our faith. It enables our love and energizes our service. The gospel assures us of God’s goodness toward us. It moves us into doing good works for others. This gospel comes to you in Word and Sacrament. It’s the preaching you hear in church. It’s the teaching you receive in Bible class. It’s living in your baptism as you daily confess your sin and repent. It’s receiving Christ’s body and blood in the Sacrament. This is how the life of the vine gets into us branches. The life-giving gospel flows into us. So to abide in the vine, to draw our life from the vine, we need to be where the gospel is. That’s why it is so vitally important to stay connected to Christ here in church. This is where Word and Sacrament take place. This is the power station that Christ himself has established, precisely in order for you to stay connected to him.

The danger in all this is to loosen our connection to Christ. The danger is in detaching yourself from Christ's church. Some people seem to think you can have the one without the other, that you can have Jesus without his church. But you can't. It doesn't work that way. Christ has brought us into his church, and he wants us to stay here, because this is where the life is. This is where branches draw nourishment from the vine to bear much fruit. Apart from the vine, you will die. Abide in the vine, and you will live and bear fruit. But stay away from the vine, stray away from his church, and you are in grave danger of dying spiritually.

This is a real temptation for so many people these days. It's the "I don't need to go to church" syndrome. "Oh, I don't need to go to church to believe in God," some folks say. Well, that's just foolishness. Such a statement will never come from the Holy Spirit. Never. The Holy Spirit never leads a person to pit the church against Jesus. Christ is the one whose church it is. He says, "I will build my church." Jesus promises to be present in the midst of his people, where two or three are gathered in his name. Unfortunately, this "I don't need church" wrong-headed thinking has gotten into the heads of many church members. But this is as foolish as a branch thinking that it's better off independent of the vine. To say, "I don't believe in organized religion," is like a branch saying, "I don't need organized plant life." Utter foolishness.

So instead of seeing how little of Christ you can get by with, try seeing how much of Christ you can get. Let me repeat that. Don't see how little of Jesus you can get by with, but instead see how much of him you can get. For Jesus has definitely tied the promise of his presence to the Word and Sacrament ministry he has instituted. "Abide in me, and I in you," he says. And then he adds, "If you abide in me, and my words abide in you. . . ." Notice, you abide in Christ and he abides in you through his words. So let the words of Christ abide in you. Words like: "I am the bread of life." "I am the light of the world." "I am the good shepherd." "I am the resurrection and the life." "I am the vine; you are the branches." These life-giving words of Jesus will abide within you. These gospel promises are your source of life and fruitfulness.

Yes, let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, as you rejoice in the gift of Holy Baptism, as you hear the comforting words of Holy Absolution, and as you take into your body the body and blood of Christ in Holy Communion. Let God's word transform your mind and sink deep into your soul, as you sing the liturgy and hymns of the church, as you take to heart the preaching of God's word, as you are instructed in the Holy Scriptures, and as you meditate on God's word in daily devotions. Let Jesus' words abide in you.

Do you want to know how to be the most productive and fruitful kind of Christian you can be? Do nothing. That's right, do nothing, stay here, don't go anywhere. What I mean by that is, simply remain right here where Christ has brought you today: where you draw your life from Christ the vine; where you are connected to him, in the life of the church, through the ministry of Word and Sacrament. Receive from Jesus. That's the secret to a fruitful life of love and good works. This abiding in the vine will empower and enliven you to do good stuff for Christ's kingdom and to love and serve your neighbor.

So abide in the vine. Stay connected to Christ. Your relationship to Jesus is your basic identity in life, like branches to the vine. He is the source of your life and the secret to your fruitfulness. Receive the

juice of life as you continue steadfast in his word, live day by day in your baptism, and come again and again to his table. This is where and how you find what you need to be fruitful. So the message today is simple: Stay where you are—remain connected to Christ—and this will get you going and growing. Abide in the vine, and you will bear much fruit. In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.