

Vinedresser – Vine - Branches
John 15:1-8
Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 2, 2021

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

Our text, Jesus says, “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser... [and again,] I am the vine; you are the branches.”

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ,

Last Sunday, we moved from the first three Easter Sundays’ focus on the *events* surrounding the resurrected Lord to the *themes*, if you will, surrounding the resurrected Lord: What is his relationship to the Church? How does He describe his commitment to her and her to Him?

Last Sunday, Christ – the great I AM – declared his relationship with His Church was one of Good Shepherd and sheep. Recall, he twice spoke that great declaration: “I am the good shepherd.” The first time, he said, “I am the good shepherd... I lay down my life for the sheep.” The second time, he said, “I am the good shepherd... know my own and my own know me, as my Father knows me and I know the Father.” That second declaration isn’t as well-known or well-loved (after all, it’s about Jesus and the Father, not Jesus and “me”), but it’s just as important because it helps us see that Jesus sees his relationship with *you* is not just between “him and you.” Rather, (in that theme) the Good Shepherd cares for the sheep on behalf of the Owner of the sheep who loves them.

Today, though the **theme** is different (the vine and the branches) and the **focus** is different (not Jesus laying down *his* life, but, a focus on *our* life in Christ), nevertheless the **relationships** are the same....*and* the number of “I AM” declarations is the same! – not just one, but two! Again, we *always* remember the one which is about *you* and Jesus: “I am the vine, you are the branches,” he says... but, we less often remember the one about Jesus’ relationship to the Father: “I am the vine, my Father is the vinedresser.” And, in this case (unlike last week)... that’s the *first* of the declarations, on which the second is built.

Thus, to understand the relationships within the themes – Good Shepherd to sheep and vine to branches – we must also acknowledge and understand the importance of the relationship between Good Shepherd and *Owner of the sheep*, and Vine and *Vinedresser*. And that’s right where our text begins:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser,” Jesus says. Why is this important and where does the line of thought come from? Our text from John 15 is a continuation of what is sometimes referred to as Jesus’ Farewell Discourses, which occur in the Upper Room on the night of his betrayal, beginning in John 14 with the words, “Let not your hearts be troubled. Believe in God; believe also in me.” Notice, immediately, the “threefold relationship” – “Believe in *me*” - Jesus, “Believe in *God*” - the Father, and the one *believing* – the Christian. A few verses later, Jesus would say, “No one comes to

the Father, but by me.” And a few verses after that, “Have I been with you so long... yet you ask, ‘Show us the Father’? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” And then he says something that informs *why* he includes this image of vine and vinedresser; he says:

“I do not speak on my own authority... the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me... I do as the Father has commanded me, so that the world may know that I love the Father.”

And all of *that* leads right into these words: “I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser.”

Notice how this informs the Christian faith. You do not have your own little personal relationship with Jesus. In fact, there’s One Jesus loves *more* than you... and that’s the Father. Jesus laid down his life for you, not because you were worth it to *Jesus* (as if his love for you sought to defiantly save you from a loveless Father, who would have rather seen you condemned)... but Jesus laid down his life because the Father so desired your salvation that He commanded the dutiful Son to do His good and gracious will. Remember, *The Father* “so loved the world that He gave His only Son.” Or, as our epistle reading says it: “In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live (that was the *Father’s* will)... we might live through *him* (through the Son). “

So, in learning these Easter themes of our heavenly relationship with Jesus, the teaching would be incomplete if it did not include the relationship to and with the Father. And yet, that relationship should not be taken for granted! Our sin had separated us from our God! We were at odds with God, naked in our shame, dead in our trespasses, as good as condemned in the holy courts! And yet, now Jesus speaks – in view of the certain work of the cross – Jesus speaks in themes that include an assumed relationship with the Father... a relationship with the Father *not* directly, but *through* Jesus... Jesus, the Good Shepherd who cares for the owner's sheep, or Jesus the vine, to whom are attached the branches in whom the vinedresser delights as they bear his fruit. All of *that* is wrapped up in these first few verses of our text:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.”

That's a relationship of invested labors of love we can all imagine: we can see the grapevine, that grapevine grows strong and healthy... and we can imagine the cultivator – the vinedresser – scanning carefully over the branches and the fruit they bear. He isn't at all concerned about the health of the *main vine*... he doesn't spend his time down around the roots and base of the vine... but his attention is on, and the concern is for, *the branches*. Bad branches get cut off, good branches have the fruit harvested and are pruned back that they may bear more fruit.

Now, on hearing that there are two types of branches – some that bear fruit/are pruned, and some that are dead and removed – we recognize that fruit-bearing (good works) *is* part of the Christian life. So, immediately the hearer may either become concerned as to whether he has enough good works to be a living branch, **or** the hearer may try to interpret his life’s suffering as a pruning of the *righteous* and, thus, his confidence before God. And so, to pre-empt this self-despair or self-righteousness, Jesus reminds us this fruit-bearing is not a cause of justification when he says, “Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you.”

That reference to being “clean” may seem like an out-of-place statement in imagery of the vine... until we realize that the adjective for being “clean” (*katharos*) is the same root word for the verb “to prune” (*kathairoi*) – in all of Scripture, used only once, there in verse two. Thus, Jesus silences our doubts or our pride by saying, ‘Do not look for God to send worldly troubles to prune you, that you might be assured of your own righteousness. Nor despair, worrying whether you have borne enough fruit to earn your place on the vine.’ Indeed, there’s no justification to be found in the branch.

In fact, this entire text isn’t even really about justification! Jesus says, “*Already* you are clean.” Jesus speaks not of fruitbearing bringing about justification; He’s talking about bearing fruit as one already attached to Christ, doing good works, living the life of a baptized child of God.

Apart from Christ, even our baptismal life we cannot live. (That's why, in the text, the phrase "bear fruit" is not a command! "Abide" is.) Jesus does not just save us, then command us to bear fruit in the Christian life ourselves, but keeps and sustains us in our baptismal life of fruitbearing by the power of His Word.

The Word – there is what prunes you: "Already you are clean / pruned because of the word I have spoken to you." The Word condemns your sin, calls you to repentance, forgives you, and teaches you how you should go. It prunes back the wild growth of the sinner and retrains the branch to bear fruit. As Paul says it, "**We are God's workmanship** (the produce of the vinedresser's careful labor), **created in Christ Jesus** (carefully grafted into the life of the Vine and tenderly nurtured to health) **for good works** (for fruit-bearing)."

Thus, to both the despondent and the proud, Jesus says simply, My Word does the pruning. Remain in my word and you will be my disciples. Or, as he says it here: "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."

A bit of humble-pie, isn't it? In other words, "You are not your own. You have not been created by your own doing, nor redeemed by your own doing, nor will you be kept in the faith by your own doing... your strength will not suffice; your wisdom will not self-lead; your righteousness will not bear its own fruit."

No branch remains alive apart from the vine. We need that reminder often, don't we, when tempted to "go it alone" ... our belief that the branch can be its own vine – as if Christ died to free us from our need of Him.

But it's not the vine that dies when separated from the branch, but the branch that dies when separated from the vine. Thus, if we want to 'see the Father' (as the disciples requested of Jesus just verses earlier: "Show us the Father, that will suffice"), if we want a relationship with the vinedresser, that lasting relationship can only be found as one attached to the vine. A branch apart from the vine is only *judged* by the vinedresser as dead and worthless. But, attached to the vine, the branch is a glorious sight before the vinedresser, bearing much fruit. Again, Jesus says it this way: "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." Notice: nothing. Nothing of which the vinedresser takes note. Nothing that bears fruit. Nothing that produces life. Jesus continues:

"If anyone does not abide in me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

There's really not much more to be said, is there? Apart from Christ, no relation between the Christian and the Father. In Christ, the certainty of salvation, the joy of fruit-bearing, a certain relationship with the Father himself. Isn't that what Jesus says next?:

“If you abide in me, and my words in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

Not only is fruitbearing joyful when firmly rooted in Christ Jesus, but so also is prayer... that relationship with the Father. Prayer apart from Christ can be frightening and uncertain: how do I know I’m asking for the right thing? How do I know my words are fitting and proper before the Holy God? How do I know I even have the Holy God’s attention, even have access to Him?

But, in Christ and through the vine, the branches have access to and are the pride and joy of the vinedresser, so that he inspects carefully their health and tends to their every need. To pray “Our Father” is no small thing... for it does not belong to the whole world, to all who – feeling the effects of being a withering and dying branch – now appeal to the vinedresser *as* a lifeless twig on the ground: to them he will lend no aid. But to the branch grafted to the vine, to the one whose life is hidden in Christ Jesus, that branch is the joy of the vinedresser, and the Father cherishes caring for that branch.

Isn’t that the most comforting truth! That, when we are connected to Christ by baptism – grafted into the vine to grow and bear fruit as a branch – that relationship not only defines our relationship with the vinedresser, but also defines our words to him (words of Christ, really... holy, truthful, righteous): “If you abide in me, *and my words abide in you*, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”

And, as prayer is the appeal of daily life for that which is holy, truthful, righteous, then what is true for prayer is true for fruit-bearing. Apart from Christ, nothing. In Christ, holy, truthful, righteous... fruit that actually looks like it belongs not just to the branch, but to the vine... because it does: no one says, “wow, this apple tree branch bears good fruit.” We say, “wow, this tree – the entire thing – bears good fruit.” Indeed, fruit of the *new* creation. Fruit of those whose New Adam identity is hidden with Christ and who, in the risen Lord, already have a share in the resurrection.

You see why these images are so fitting for Easter? What good is a shepherd who cannot overcome death, or a vine not ever-living, but itself withers away? But if Himself resurrected to the life of the new creation, our sure defense and life-giver! If we part ourselves from the risen and ascended Christ, nothing. No good works. No fruit-bearing. No life. Only the death and emptiness of the old creation. But, in the risen, ascended Christ, we share in all that is raised with him – his life, his fruitbearing, his relationship with the Father... as He himself says it, “I am the vine; my Father is the vinedresser.... I am the vine, you are the branches.”

In the Name of the Father
And of the Son
And of the Holy Spirit.
+ AMEN +

Rev. Mark C. Bestul
Calvary Lutheran Church
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