

John 15:1-8 - "Let's Keep in Touch"

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With all the graduations taking place this time of year, I was thinking about my graduation from High School many moons ago. I'm not sure if it's still done today, but we would usually sign each other's yearbooks. And one of the most common closing comments when signing someone's yearbook were the words, "Let's keep in touch." Sound familiar? Keeping in touch is an essential ingredient for meaningful relationships.

In our Gospel reading Jesus talks about keeping in touch as well—keeping in touch with Him who gives us our greatest blessings. *"I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him [keeps in touch], he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."*

While some friends in this life come and go, and we still manage to survive, Jesus is a friend and Savior whom we can't live without. That's a fact which some people either don't know or try to prove wrong to their own peril. [Children's sermon.] This is an olive tree plant. When it gets older, in about 3-4 years it can start to produce olive fruit. But, what would happen if I cut off one of the branches of this olive tree? It would be like one of those cut flowers behind the altar. They're pretty, and free from their roots, but will those flowers or this olive branch produce any fruit? No. It won't take long for them to wither and die. The same is true for you and me if we're cut off from Jesus. That's why it's important to stay in touch or connected to Jesus who died to cut off our sins and rose from the dead to take care of us in this life and forever in heaven.

Today I would like to emphasize from our text some of the blessings which God gives us through our connection with Him. First, Jesus says, *"I AM the vine."* In our Gospel reading last Sunday Jesus said, *"I AM the Good Shepherd."* When Jesus uses the phrase *"I AM"* He is usually identifying Himself as the same God who revealed Himself to Moses when He said, *"I AM WHO I AM"* (Exodus 3:14). Jesus is the only one who can live independent from others, even though He Himself never lives apart from His Father and the Holy Spirit.

Together as one, God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit created all things, including mankind. As our Creator and the only source of life, the Lord knows that *"apart from [Him we] can do nothing."* As Jesus emphasizes this truth in our text (the importance of remaining connected to Him), He at the same time emphasizes His undying love for us. To hear such words of love and concern coming from Almighty God, who has every right to condemn us because of our foolish, sinful efforts of trying to live apart from Him, is blessing #1 - God's undying love for us sinners.

Because of our sins, God knows that He could not leave it up to us to establish or maintain our connection with Him. It's a connection which He Himself had to establish first by becoming a man in order to pay for our sins through His death on a cross. Then, after His resurrection from the dead, He continues to come to us spiritually and physically, working through other people (pastor's, parents, friends), to provide us with all that we need to establish and maintain our life saving faith in Him through His means of grace—His Word and Sacraments of Holy Baptism and Holy Communion. God's love in action is blessing #2.

But, as you well know, even with all that Almighty God does to re-establish and maintain our connection with Him, we still manage to drift out of touch with Him. When does that happen? When other things or people become more important in our lives than God. So what does God do? He *"prunes"* us.

I'm not much of a gardener, but even I know that for a plant, like this olive tree, to grow strong and remain healthy it needs to be pruned. Too many offshoots rob the plant of its strength and vitality—it stunts its growth. Our Lord applies this gardening wisdom to our lives as His people when He speaks of pruning every branch that bears fruit, *“that it may bear more fruit.”*

What are some of the offshoots in our lives which we can allow to stunt our growth as God's people? Take for example some of the labor saving devices in this computerized age, which promise to make our lives easier, and yet stress related problems continue to rise. As a result we may begin to do some of our own pruning. Unfortunately, one of the first things our sinful nature tempts us to prune back is our time with God.

Fortunately God is involved in the pruning process as well. I'm going to call that blessing #3, even though we don't normally think of the loss of the things of this world as a blessing. But whatever God prunes out of our lives to help keep us connected to Him is certainly good in the long run, or should I say in the eternal run! He does it because He loves us and does not want to loose us again.

This leads to the most important blessing which results from being in touch with Jesus. Our Lord promises that *“if a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.”* What is this fruit? The Bible talks a lot about the outward fruit that comes from God's people once they are a part of His family (and I'm sure that's part of what Jesus is talking about in our text), but what's the fruit that hopefully results inwardly from the three blessing I've mentioned so far? Blessing #1 - to hear God's words of love and concern for us sinners. Blessing #2 - to know that God's love results in action, sending His Son to set us free from our sins and death through His death in our place, and rising again to personally provide us with the benefits of His love through His Word and Sacraments. Blessing #3 - God's wise pruning through which He works to help us sink our roots more firmly into Him instead of the things of this world. All three of these blessings hopefully result in blessing #4 - a saving faith in Jesus as our Savior.

Inwardly, such faith in Jesus Christ as our Savior from sin, death, and the devil enables us to trust in God's eternal, loving presence with us. This certainty of our eternal salvation in Christ results in unending peace, joy in this life, even during times of trouble.

Outwardly, such faith can't help but be obvious to others. A little girl on her way home from church turned to her mother and said, “Mom, pastor's sermon was confusing.” When the mother asked why, her daughter said, “Well, first he said that ‘God is bigger than us.’ Is that true?” “Yes,” her mother said. So the little girl continued. “But pastor also said that ‘God lives in us.’ Is that true?” Again her mother said, “Yes, honey, that's also true.” “Well, said the little girl, “if God is bigger than us and He lives in us, wouldn't He show through?” And the answer to that is a big YES!.

May God's love, joy, peace, patience, gentleness, self-control, and goodness continue to show through in our lives, “until harvests [in this world] cease” (LSB #691:4), [*proving us to be His disciples*]; that others may be led to Christ as well, and know the love, joy and peace that comes by keeping in touch with Him.

All glory be to God, the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.