

“The Vine and the Branches” by Rev. Steven Sommerer
May 2, 2021 Fifth Sunday of Easter

Christ has risen! He has risen, indeed. Alleluia! Grace and peace to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

The sermon text is from John 15:1-8.

When I was a kid, my four brothers and I would help on the farm with Aunt Jane and Uncle Lloyd, and we'd get to work with our closest cousins and be traded back and forth, whether it was planting tobacco or hauling hay or whatever was going on. And those are the best memories. The work was hard, but we were outside with our cousins, and Aunt Jane always made the most wonderful meals when we came in from the fields.

Working with the tobacco was the hardest even though, by the time I was old enough to help it was probably only an acre or so. After the tobacco was planted, you had to follow and cover the plants and water them from the creek. As the plants grew they were topped so they wouldn't flower. Once the bud was removed the plants put out sucker branches that if you didn't get 'em off the plant, would suck the plant's energy away from producing nice broad tobacco leaves. Then, of course, the leaves would be scored as poorer quality and bring less money.

I don't remember the suckering part. I know my mom and her 11 brothers and sisters suckered the plants for her dad when she was growing up. I can't remember if we did that when I was a kid, or if that was done with chemicals by then. But it's always stuck with me that suckering or pruning the plant was ultimately good for it. As long as that sucker was attached, it kept the plant from putting its energy into the leaves.

Jesus is the True Vine. You are the Branches. A branch can't connect itself to the Vine. That's not how it works. And you didn't connect yourself to Jesus, decide for

Him, invite Him into your heart or make Him your Lord and Savior. You were baptized into Christ. Just after our text, Jesus said, *“You did not choose Me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit.”*

So, you are a Branch off Christ the Vine because you were baptized into Christ. Jesus said, *“You are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you.”* Now, your spiritual life comes from the Vine that nourishes you the branches. *“If a man remains in Me and I in Him,”* Jesus said, *“He will bear much fruit.”* How do you remain in Jesus? Through faith. How is that faith nourished? The life-giving, death-defeating flesh and blood of Christ is the nourishment that flows into you. That’s the gift of the Lord’s Supper. *“Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood,”* Jesus said, *“has eternal life; and I will raise him up at the Last Day.”* So, Jesus feeds you with Himself, given for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Now, what’s interesting in our text is that the Heavenly Father, the Vinedresser, prunes you His branches so that you become more fruitful. God wants you to bear fruit. Galatians 5 says, *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* As a Christian if you bear no fruit, you aren’t a real Christian. Your faith is a lie and you are going to hell. *“Don’t be deceived, God is not mocked,”* Galatians 6 says. If your faith is of the sort that you can live nasty, disgraceful lives, then you are the withered, lifeless branch Jesus talks about; and if that’s so you will be gathered, *“thrown into the eternal fire of hell and burned.”* John the Baptist said, *“Bear the fruit of repentance.”* Please, dear branches, beloved of Christ, don’t let yourself believe you can be a living branch and still live like hell.

The fruits or good works you bear don't make you a living branch. It's the Vine you are joined to, the Spirit-given faith and the Word of Life flowing in you, that makes you alive. Look at 1 John 4: "*In this is love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us... If God so loved us, let us love one another.*" Notice, the fruit comes from God. Philippians 2 says, "*It is God who works in you both to will and to act according to His purpose.*"

Our Epistle from 1 John 4 tells us the kinds of fruits God will produce in you, if you are indeed a living Branch of Christ. Firstly, you'll test the spirits and avoid false teachers. Living Branches care about truth. Avoid false teachers and all who deny that Jesus came and still comes in the flesh in His Sacrament. Secondly, "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone that loveth is born of God and knoweth God.*" You cannot claim to be of God and hate your neighbor.

God connected you to Jesus the Vine to bear the fruit of love. Racial anger and bigotry cannot exist in the heart of a Christian. We cannot despise those with whom we politically disagree, even if they are profoundly misguided. Because we love them, we will oppose ignorant, misguided or even demonic ideas, but we can never hate. In reality, that only hurts and forms an ugly, dark scar on your soul. All people are souls for whom Christ died; and we and they need Christ the Savior of sinners. There are so many in need whom God would have you love and serve, and even when we get careless God uses our vocations to reach through us. God protects through policemen, heals through medical workers, teaches and clothes through parents, feeds through farmers. Each of your given vocations is a way God serves and loves through you.

Sometimes our vocations become a source of sadness. Maybe we wish we could do something else or start to get burned out. That's when, you must remember that you serve God in that calling, by serving your boss; by teaching that high school student; or by being a Sunday school teacher or Church council member, or a wife or husband to your spouse. If you grow weary, "*Cast your cares on Jesus,*" Peter said, "*He cares for you.*" Your callings are good and God-pleasing works, and if they cause frustration your God can uphold you and strengthen you. And even when the mother diapering a baby through sleep-deprived eyes, wants to give up from exhaustion, that's God's work, and it's holy and precious to Him. Jesus is the Vine and His strength flows through you; even as He puts His own life into you at the Lord's Table.

One of the great certainties of life is that you will suffer. If you live any amount of time, you will experience persecution and hardship; the values you cherish as a Christian will be assaulted; the health you enjoy will slip away. Even for branches off the Vine, much of life involves pruning. And Jesus warns His 12: "*I have told you these things so that **in Me** you may have peace.*" Your joyous and good moments in life are times for you Branches to be strengthened for the days when life's winds and storms will surely come and blow hard, lashing the Branches and threatening to sever your connection to Jesus.

One of the most precious passages of all Scripture is in our Epistle: "*God is love.*" Yet, we think if God is love we shouldn't go through trials; that if anyone should have it easy, it's the Branch connected to Christ. But with those old tobacco plants, if the tops weren't cut and the suckers pulled, the leaves would be puny.

Only God knows the trajectory of your life, and the crosses you'll bear. And only God knows how He's working all things for the good of you His child. I might have an idea how that should look, but God is smarter than you and I are. God knows that there are times when distractions and possessions and chasing after stuff can make us withered, lifeless branches.

Selfishness and pride can cause us to love ourselves rather than let God's love flow through us. Pruning may never be comfortable, but God has an ultimate end in mind – that is to save you by God's grace through faith in Jesus alone. That's called the life of faith. God knows better than I, so we trust in His judgment. The One who loved you so much He stepped from heaven to live and die for you and rise from the dead could never – not in a million years – have anything but your best in His heart of love.

As a partial genius, what I have noticed is that when I'm tempted not to discipline my kids, it's never because I love them; rather, it's from a love of self or desire not to be bothered. But good tobacco farmers sucker and vinedressers prune.

Hebrews 12 says this about your Heavenly Vinedresser: *“It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? For [our earthly fathers] disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but God disciplines us for our good, that we may share His holiness. For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.”*

Beloved, you belong to Jesus, adopted sons and daughters in His family. He loves you with an unfailing love. Trust the Vinedresser, as your lives bear the peaceful fruit of righteousness. And know that no wind or storm, nothing in all creation can sever you from Christ the Vine and His perfect love. Amen.

And now may the peace of God which surpasses human understanding keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.