

Sermon April 28, 2024 John 15:1-8

**Grace, mercy, and peace be unto you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.
Amen.**

Jesus the Vine . . . you the branches . . . the Father the vinedresser. This is the picture we have in today's Gospel teaching us about how we fit into the kingdom of God.

The core message is this: Only when you are joined to Jesus in faith are you truly alive and fruitful. Only then are you living branches joined to a living vine. Apart from Jesus you are a dead and fruitless branch. And dead branches need to be cut away so the vine remains healthy. Living branches need to be pruned back so they produce even more fruit. And the Father's shears with which he does the cutting are the Law by which He prunes away the old Adam - our sinful nature.

You may wonder sometimes what God is up to. Why does He so often permit hardship and misfortune to come upon Christians? It seems the norm. Why do bad things happen to believers? The answer is this: He's pruning away the dead branches and trimming the living ones so that our faith grows ever stronger, and we produce even more fruit of the Spirit.

In the off-season, vines are pruned back severely so that just a few branches remain on an old, gnarled trunk. They look as though they'll never produce leaves, much less fruit. There are barely any branches. All of last year's growth is pruned away and discarded. But the effective result of such pruning becomes apparent when the spring growth gives way to much summer fruit. If those vines were not pruned back so hard, the vine would give a much smaller yield of grapes.

The process is quite similar with fruit trees. Up close, fruit trees in production aren't a particularly pretty sight. The goal isn't to get a tree that's pleasing to the eye. The goal is to get a good harvest of delicious fruit. The main branches are topped off to limit the height for the pickers. The side branches are pruned in close to keep the branches from breaking under the weight of the fruit. Often the top branches are tied up to keep them from sagging. You wouldn't want to do this to an ornamental tree in your front yard. However, such pruning is precisely how you get the most fruit.

With us being the branches and God the vinedresser, we are being cut and pruned with the goal of us producing more and more spiritual fruit. This certainly means we will look more like the grape vines with less leaves and more grapes. Rather than looking like trees trimmed for beauty, like the cheery trees in Washington DC, we will look like the ragged fruit trees with short limbs, cropped tops, and gangly supports. When I look in the mirror,

the tree I see is not like those meticulously trimmed show trees at the Phipps. Rather, it looks like those 1000 year old olive trees on the Mt. of Olives outside Jerusalem. Our life will not, and probably should not, look like much to outsiders. We should listen with caution to those who teach their lives are so great, fun, and successful because they believe in Jesus. And ours should be too. That comes from a different spirit than the one we receive in God's true Word.

The Master Vinedresser does not prune for good looks so that the world can admire how religious you are. Rather, He prunes for fruit. He cuts away the dead branches that have succumbed to sin; while also pruning the living branches so that they will bear even more fruit. This is extremely painful at times, as we are members of the fallen human race and at the same time citizens of the Kingdom of God.

Our old human nature would rather grow wild, like an unpruned vine or tree. You have probably seen what happens when a tree or vine goes untended and is allowed to just grow all over the place. There's lots of green on the outside, lots of dead wood on the inside . . . but very little, if any, fruit.

That's how Jesus described the religious folks of His day – whitewashed tombs. Law abiding to a fault and pure and holy on the outside, but dead on the inside. On the other hand, the faithful believer in Christ is often exactly the opposite – dead on the outside, but alive to God on the inside.

And how does this happen? It all has to do with the key word in today's Gospel – the word 'abide.' So, 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."

No, what happens when a branch is broken from a tree? It dies. Oh, perhaps not right away, but sooner or later it dries up. And it certainly doesn't bear any fruit. In like manner, what happens to the believer when he or she is cut off from the Vine, from Christ, from His Word, for His body and blood? The same thing. To be sure, faith doesn't necessarily die right away. It slowly shrivels up.

Our risen Lord says, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing." But let's be honest. Often, we take our life in Christ for granted . . . whether it's our lackadaisical church habits, or the casual way we approach God's Word. We assume we're fine on our own and all we need is a little shot of Jesus now and then to keep us going. But right there is one of the devil's greatest tricks – to convince the branch that it doesn't need the Vine, or all that the branch needs is to be reasonably close to the Vine now and then.

But try laying a dead branch next to a tree and see how well that works. No, to abide means to dwell in, to be attached to. And to abide in Christ is to live in Him through faith. It's a baptismal way of speaking – you have been baptized into Christ . . . your life is hidden with Christ in God . . . you have been grafted into the true and living Vine.

By the Holy Spirit, you have been given the gift of faith – a gift which joins and grafts you into Christ the Vine and which receives all that He has to give you . . . His forgiveness, His life, His love. Yes, Christ is your life, and it is the life eternal. There is no life apart from Him. And so, to abide in Him is not a sporadic thing, something that happens once a week for an hour or so or even less. That's not abiding. Abiding is diving in the deep end. It's an organic union, a living graft, a fruitful communion where Christ continually feeds us and makes us fruitful each and every day.

When we ask why we as Christians are not more fruitful, one main reason is because we are not strongly connected to the Source of our new life in Jesus. When God applies the pruning shears to your life and cuts away some of the idols that get in the way of your abiding in Jesus, such losses in your life are one of many dead branches being pruned away. They are more idols being kicked over. More distractions being eliminated. We want to be *happy*; but God wants us to be fruitful. We want to be *comfortable*; but God wants us to be comforted. We want to be pruned to *look good* to ourselves and others; but God wants to prune us so we produce more of the fruits of the Spirit.

And what is this 'fruit' that a person joined by faith to Jesus produces? In the New Testament letter to the Galatians the apostle Paul lists eight fruits: "Joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control." And these do not come from being obedient to Jesus and doing what he says. Instead, these fruits come from the Spirit who flows like living water from the Vine to the branch making it fruitful. And then he immediately reminds us that those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. We need to be pruned if we are to bear the Spirit's fruit.

And you can reduce that list of eight down to one word – 'love.' Such love is the fruit of faith. It is not a deep liking of your dog, cat, or ice cream. It is not a feeling of strong satisfaction, attraction, or friendship, be it romantic or otherwise. We're talking about love as attitude and action. Such is the goodness that causes one to lay down one's life for another. It is also the kindness that gives with no regard for receiving anything back in return. This is love as in God sending His Son into the world to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. Love as in "God is love." So, St. John says in the second reading today, "In this is love, not that we have loved God but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation (the atoning sacrifice, the payment) for our sins."

Yes, God is love. As branches connected to the Vine, we are growing in that love. It takes time. A lifetime.

Here is where the Vine and Branches analogy works so beautifully. Love flows from the Father, through the Son, by the Spirit to the branches who are alive in Christ. It flows from the wounded side of Jesus, the water and the blood, from the font and the Supper, from His Words that flow into our ears.

Nice green leaves are a sign of a healthy branch. But a branch is not known by the leaves but rather its fruit. We can have the appearance of a healthy branch by the way we talk, dress, and get involved. However, Jesus says, “By their fruit you will know them,” And that love of God in Christ that flows through you will produce fruit – thirty, sixty, a hundred-fold for those around you. “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and be my disciples,” Abiding, after all, is not about ‘proving to be,’ but simply ‘being.’ The branch shows itself for what it is by the fruit it produces.

God bless you with the power of His Holy Spirit that you be a disciple of Jesus. That you be firmly connected to the Vine. That you endure the pruning that comes from the Lord. And that together as his people we produce much of the fruit of the Spirit of Love. Amen.

The peace of God guard your hearts and minds as you believe and trust in him. Amen.

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