

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church
Shobonier, Illinois
Easter 5B
May 2, 2021
John 15:1-8

How to Be a Fruitful Branch

“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.” (John 15:5 ESV)

In the name of Jesus Christ, the true Vine, and only Savior of the world,

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!]

It’s obvious that the purpose of a vine is to bear fruit. So it’s quite reasonable that if a branch is not bearing fruit, it will be cut off and burned in the fire. It just makes sense. But if all we hear in this text is talk about fruit, we miss the point. For the point of this text is the utter necessity of the branches to remain, or abide, in the vine. Only then can they produce the expected fruit.

Yet, the impression is often given that the most important thing in the Christian life is bringing forth fruit – whatever that is. Whether it’s good works in the eyes of the world, acts of service to others, being nice or politically correct, self-achievement, moral purity, or even exhibiting “love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control” (Gal. 5:22-23), it’s still all about the fruit. With such an emphasis, the Christian life is described in the way of the Law. And if your life doesn’t bring forth the fruit someone else thinks it should, then you’re not a Christian, or at least, not a “good” Christian. They may say something like, “If you want to be rid of sin and to be saved, you must not only believe; but you must also live in such and such a way and do and suffer a specified amount. . . . They do not say that we have forgiveness of sin through Christ, but they command me to do good works in order that I may be cleansed from sin” (LW 24, 217).

Or, we may spend our time looking around to see if we are bearing fruit or to see if someone else is bearing them. We can become so wrapped up in the fruits that they become our god. Possibly without realizing it, we trust in our own good works as the basis for our standing before God. Such a trust will lead to either self-righteousness or despair. For if we focus only, or mostly, on the fruits, we can never be sure if we bear enough of them or if they are acceptable to God. We may think they are, but we can never be sure.

So Jesus here gives us a different description of the Christian life and describes for us the only way we can bear fruit pleasing to God. And, quite simply, it’s by being branches abiding, remaining, in the Vine, which is Christ. As we are such branches, as we are in Christ, we naturally bear fruit pleasing to God.

But we can't abide in Christ unless we first have been grafted into Him. And that's just what has happened. You see, our natural condition is being not "in Him." By nature we are dead, unfruitful branches unable to bear good fruit. We can do no works which are good in God's sight. We are good for nothing and are destined for eternal destruction. That being the case, we can do nothing to become attached to the Vine. We cannot become a branch through our own reason, strength, or merits, or by choosing or deciding to attach ourselves to the Vine.

No, becoming a branch attached to the Vine is the work of the Vinedresser. By the Gospel of Jesus' death and resurrection, we become branches of the True Vine. Through the forgiveness of sins the Holy Spirit creates faith by which we are made branches which draw our life from Jesus alone. Jesus says, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." Paul writes, "In Him you also trusted, after you heard the Word of truth, the gospel of your salvation; in whom also, having believed, you were sealed with the Holy Spirit of promise" (Eph. 1:13). We were grafted into the True Vine the same way as the Ethiopian eunuch was, through faith created by the preached Word and Baptism (Acts 8:26-40).

And thus, having been grafted to the True Vine, we draw our very life from Him. We need to stay connected to Jesus and all that He offers for our very life. We need the food and nourishment He gives us to live and to bear fruit. Indeed, "To abide in Christ is to continue believing in him; and because the chief business of faith is to receive from Christ, abiding in him means to keep on receiving from him grace for grace, day by day, in ever greater fulness. . . . It is essential to this abiding by faith in Christ that the Word and Sacrament, which convey to us his grace and gifts, be constantly used; there is no abiding except through these means."

That's why it's so important to be here week after week. For this is where we are fed by the True Vine. This is where we are fed with life-sustaining nutrients as we hear the Word and as we receive our Lord's Body and Blood in the Sacrament. This is absolutely essential. If you don't hear again and again and again that your sins are forgiven for Jesus' sake, if you cut yourself off from the means of grace, the means of forgiveness, you cut yourself off from Jesus and from faith itself. It just isn't enough to read the Bible at home. Remember, the Ethiopian eunuch couldn't understand the message of the Scriptures until someone preached to Him. Even Jesus' disciples couldn't understand the message until He opened their minds to understand the Scriptures. As Paul says in Romans 10, "So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing from the Word of Christ."

Now if we don't abide in Christ, if we cut ourselves off from Him and the life He gives, we can't do anything that pleases God, no matter how hard we try. And if we don't abide in Christ, if we are merely attached to the vine outwardly, we won't bear fruit. We will die. We will be cut off and burned. Even if we appear to be doing all the right things, if the life-giving nutrients don't get from the Vine to the branch or if the branch refuses to accept that life-giving sap, then it dies. And if that happens, the Father will cut that branch off and cast it into the fire. There is nothing more horrible than that.

But, if a branch remains fully connected to the vine, if the branch is receiving everything that the vine sends its way, then it will produce fruit, and not just a little, but a lot. And all the credit goes to the Vine-dresser. What's more, the Father prunes the branches so they will produce even more fruit. He cuts back at just the right time, in just the right place, in just the right way. Now this pruning is the trials and struggles in our lives. It may be an affliction of some kind, an illness or a disease. It may be strained relationships, or financial setbacks, or a tragedy of some kind. It may be the death of a loved one. An example of such pruning is Joseph in the Old Testament. After all he had been through, he was able to declare to his brothers, "you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good" (Gen. 50:20). He had been severely pruned and had produced much fruit.

That's not to say that the branches enjoy such pruning. They don't. In fact, it hurts. It's never pleasant to be pruned. But it is for the branch's welfare. You see, as the branch is pruned, it is made stronger and thus better able to produce fruit because it is attached to the vine and must draw strength from the Vine to be healed and to live. And as the branch draws such strength, it bears much fruit which is pleasing to the Father. Yet, the branch doesn't take credit for it. For such fruit is simply the result of being connected to the Vine. Any fruit that we bear, any good works that we do is actually Christ working in us and through us, and that includes "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control."

Indeed, the Vine who gives you life, is the One who died on the cross for the forgiveness of all your sins. He is the One who, on the cross, was totally cut off and separated from His Father so that you and I might never, ever be cut off from Him, not even for a moment. Yes, Jesus is the Vine and, by His grace, you are the branches. And thus abiding in Him you will bear much fruit; you will do good works to the glory of God and for the welfare of your neighbor. And despite the pruning in your life, in fact, because of it, the Vine-dresser loves you and Christ's Word remains true, "You are already clean because of the word which I have spoken to you." Thus, drawing your life from the forgiveness of all your sins, you will abide in Christ and His words will abide in you and you will be and remain His disciples and bear abundant fruit now and forever.

Alleluia! Christ is risen! [He is risen indeed! Alleluia!] Amen.

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Rev. Timothy J. Landskroener