

Immanuel (Augsburg) Lutheran Church  
Shobonier, Illinois  
Easter 5B  
April 28, 2024  
John 15:1-8

Abiding in Christ

“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 easy to hear our Lord in today’s Gospel and lose sight of what’s most important. It’s easy to get distracted by the talk of bearing fruit or unfruitful branches being taken away, withering, being thrown into the fire, and burned. We can lose sight of the main point of what He says, and that’s the vital importance of abiding in the Him, the Vine.

Now, to abide as a branch connected to the vine, requires that we are actually connected to the vine in the first place. But how does that happen? After all, you’d think that either you are a branch or you aren’t. Yet, you cannot make yourself into a branch. You cannot attach yourself to the vine. After all, we start this life as dead sinners, not living branches. We had lost our connection to God, the source of life. We sinners have cut ourselves off from God, and we can’t glue ourselves back on. We had no living connection.

Now, I’ve heard that if you try to graft a branch onto a vine or tree, there has to be some sort of a match. There needs to be a genetic similarity, a certain amount of relatedness. And, of course, you need to have a living branch to graft. A dead branch just won’t work. So, how can we sinners—dead sinners, to boot—get ourselves connected to the living, righteous God? We can’t do it. The graft would not take. The Lord would reject us outright, and rightfully so.

No, to become a branch, a living branch, God himself must do the connecting. And here’s how He does it. First of all, Christ has to cleanse us to make us compatible. Our sins have to be removed, cleansed away, so that we are not rejected. And this is what Christ accomplished just a few hours after He spoke the words of our text. It was on the night He was betrayed that Jesus spoke these words to His disciples. Then they went out to the garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus was betrayed and arrested, and later brought to trial. The next day, Good Friday, was when Jesus paid for all your sins, and the sins of the whole world. He was

nailed to a cross and died there in our place. He did this for you! Jesus, the holy Son of God, took the punishment due for sinners. He shed His holy blood to cleanse us from our sins. His perfect righteousness is credited to us. And this is what makes us compatible, clean, acceptable to God, and not rejected. It is only because of Christ. "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you," Jesus tells his disciples. Christ's gospel word is powerful, and it does what it says. His word cleanses us and makes us alive.

In Holy Baptism, God connects us to Christ. We are joined to Jesus in His death and resurrection. Now we baptized believers are living branches, connected to the vine, Jesus Christ, by God's gracious doing. It's this Christ connection, the vital vine connection, by which we become and stay living branches.

Having become branches, it's vital remain connected to the vine. It's crucial to abide in the vine, for branches draw their life from the vine. "Abide in me," Jesus says, "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. 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."

There is no life, and certainly no fruitfulness, in us unless we remain connected to Christ. Apart from Him, we can do nothing. If we do not abide in Him, if we cut ourselves off or let ourselves get disconnected from the vine, then our source of life is lost, and we die and are doomed to hell. That's what Jesus says: "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."

How do people get disconnected from Christ? Well, you've got the devil, the world, and your own sinful flesh constantly tugging at you, pulling on you, trying to break your connection to Christ. Loosen that connection, and pretty soon you're in danger of coming detached. How does the disconnect happen? It happens when people distance themselves from church, when they stop coming to church regularly, and absent themselves from the Means of Grace. Anyone who does that is in real danger, serious danger, of his faith being weakened and eventually lost altogether. Now it's been said that seven days without God's Word makes one weak, w-e-a-k. The more you miss church, the less you miss church and the gifts and blessings God gives you here. And that's a dangerous thing.

The disconnect happens when you let the devil whisper in your ear, saying you don't need God, you can be your own God. And that's how Adam and Eve got into trouble, wasn't it? The connection gets loosened when we let the world around us draw us away from God, away from Christ and His Church. Other things become more important to us. And so the branch loses its connection to the vine, it stops bearing fruit, and it dies. All that's left for the dead, unfruitful branches is to be removed and tossed into the fire and burned. What a dreadful prospect!

Now certainly God does not want that for you! For He sent His Son, Jesus, so that you would abide in Him, the true vine. This is God's good and gracious will for you.

OK, so how does that happen? How do we abide in the vine? Simple: By staying connected. Being where the life source is, and that is wherever the Word of God is preached in its truth and purity and the Sacraments are administered according to Christ's institution. This is how you draw your life from the vine. Christ feeds and nourishes you, supplies you with the vitality you need to sustain your faith and make you productive. He does this only through His gospel means: sermons, Bible classes, preaching and teaching, the Sacrament of Christ's Body and Blood, meditating on God's Word in your daily life. Through these means, Christ the vine supplies us with the grace we need to keep going and growing and to be fruitful in our life.

Since we have been grafted into the vine and abide in it, we bear fruit. "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit," our Lord tells us. "By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples." Think about how a branch on a fruit tree bears fruit. Does it do so by trying extra hard and resolving to really do a better job of producing fruit from now on? No. All the branch needs to do is to stay connected to the vine, and it will naturally produce fruit.

Now to be sure, from time to time the vinedresser will come around and prune the branch, so that the deadness is trimmed away. Thus the branch becomes even more fruitful. From the branch's perspective, the pruning may seem rather painful at the time, but it's for the branch's good. And so Jesus says, "Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit." This describes how God works repentance in our life. It may be painful at the time, but it keeps the deadness from setting in and taking over.

The thing about a branch bearing fruit is that it doesn't have to do anything strange or unusual in order to bear fruit. It just comes naturally when the branch draws its life from the vine. It bears fruit. There's that vital vine connection again. It's the key to our being fruitful. Abide in the vine, and you will bear fruit.

What kind of fruit are we talking about? What does it look like? The big thing that Jesus has been emphasizing to His disciples is that they love one another. This is the kind of fruit Jesus' disciples will produce, that they love one another. This means you and me and our congregation, that we love one another. How we speak to one another. How we care for one another. How we look out for the brother or sister who is hurting—physically or emotionally. How we reach out to the one who is missing from our fellowship, to the one who is weighed down with sin or guilt or depression or distress. This is love. Love moves from thought into action. Where is the brother or sister who is in need? What are his or her needs? How can I help? How can we help? This is what it means to love one another.

Again, the Christ connection is key. As we are connected to the vine, Jesus Christ, His love flows into us, and then flows out through us to others. “Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God. . . . 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 through him. . . . Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another. . . . We love because He first loved us” (1 John 4:7, 9, 11, 19).

Beloved, this is the fruit of love that we branches, connected to Christ the vine, will bear. We are those living branches, and our fruitfulness comes from abiding in the vine. It’s the vital vine connection, begun in your baptism, nurtured in God’s Word and the Sacraments, blossoming in love, and producing much fruit. Branches that abide in the vine will bear fruit. “I am the vine,” Jesus says to us today, “you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.” God grant it for Jesus’ sake. Amen.

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

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