

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“I am the Vine; You are the Branches”

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May 2, 2021

John 15:1-8

It's no secret the church in America is struggling. It's been in decline for decades. Then COVID came along and gave everyone a “get out of church free card.” Many are still playing that card even after they've returned to restaurants and gyms and airports. As restrictions are lifted, few anticipate the church will get back to pre-pandemic levels.

Could it be the church is in a season of pruning? “I am the true vine” Jesus said, “and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away.” Could it be that God is using this season to cut back one fruitless branch after another?

But who are they? Who are these fruitless branches attached only outwardly to Christ the vine? Could it be they are Christians in name only. They were baptized and at one point confirmed, at which time they promised they would suffer all, even death, rather than fall away from the faith. And then, promptly, they fell away. Their love for Jesus grew cold and they only adhere outwardly. They are spiritual wrecks. There are leaves on the vine. There's growth, maybe even luxuriant growth . . . but there's no real fruit, no good works stirred up by faith. Hebrews 11, “Without faith it is impossible to please God” (v. 6). That's a tough verse, but it means what it says. “Without faith it is impossible to please God.” So all those good works people amass, all those acts of charity and service, without faith it is not God-pleasing fruit.

What happens to those branches that produce no fruit? Jesus doesn't mince words. “They are cut off and thrown into the fire.” Again, very simple language. It means what it says.

So again, who are these fruitless branches? These are people we know and love, family members, friends, but also people who know not and love not the Lord Jesus who is the true vine. Maybe they did at one point, but they have since cut themselves off or grown too far from the sap of the vine. So we pray our dear Lord to have mercy on them, to cut them back to be closer to him, but not cut them off. We pray that the pruning season proves to be a “come to Jesus season,” where every false prop is kicked out from underneath so we only have Him, to rely on. We pray God would use the circumstances of life to drive people back to Christ, and that God would use us also to tug on them with Christian love gentle reminders of His Word. We pray God would stir up their hearts through His Word and Spirit to believe again in Jesus.

In our text, Jesus also says, “Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit.” There are times when people of faith drift too far from Christ, times when we send out branches that are distant from the Vine. When you're out there so far from the source, the vine, there's little fruit to be found. So the vinedresser comes and clips you back to be closer to the Vine.

I recently pruned my apple tree, clipping off branches that were growing down or suckers that were shooting straight up and would never produce fruit, but would only rob the tree of energy. When I was finished, there were branches lying everywhere. Pruning can look and feel like a disaster. Yet God uses disasters to bring us nearer to Him and bear more fruit.

Has it happened to you? Maybe you got sick this last year with the virus, and you wondered just how bad it would get. And you prayed, earnestly, perhaps for the first time in a while. Or maybe it happened when you visited a website you shouldn't have visited, or sent a text you shouldn't have sent, and your spouse found it out. Maybe it happened when you had a little too much to drink and said something inappropriate to a coworker or a client, and it got you into trouble. Maybe it happened when you brushed up against your own mortality with a near miss on the highway and you realized just how short and fragile life is. Maybe it happened when the new norm was no longer to give thanks and praise to God for health and strength and work and spouse . . . but then one or more of these were threatened, and it renewed your thanksgiving to

God. In all these you can almost see the vinedresser snipping back branches that have grown too far from the vine.

Luther imagines a conversation between the branches and the gardener. "What are you doing? You are pinching me everywhere . . ." But the gardener would reply, "You are a fool and do not understand . . . This is a totally useless branch; it takes away your strength and your sap. This is for your own good."

"The same is true" Luther writes, "when the gardener applies manure." Then the branch fusses again. "What, pray, is this for? Is it not enough that you are hacking me to pieces? Must I also stand for this?" (LW 24, p. 194). The lesson? Be open to discipline. Be open to the season of pruning. Hebrews 12, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." It produces fruit.

There's both an art and a science to pruning things. For me, I'm rarely 100% confident in the cuts I make while pruning. But remember, Jesus says the Father is the vinedresser, the one doing the pruning. He doesn't make mistakes. He will not be too hasty. What he cuts away from us needed to be cut away, and is done so out of love for us, not wrath.

"I am the vine. You are the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing." Branches have no life of their own. Their life flows from the vine. So, too, we have no life of our own. Our life comes from the Lord our God! He's the One who created you. He's the One who breathed the breath of life into you. He's the One who gives you all you need to sustain this body and life. He's the One who sent His Son Jesus to die on a cross for you and your salvation. He's the One who rose victorious over your sin and death and gives you the victory. That is, His death and resurrection is the **only** source of true and lasting life.

"I am the true vine", Jesus said. That is, as a Christian, you are not growing out of something wild and degenerate. You are a branch of the true vine. When you were baptized you were grafted onto Christ the Vine. And there's no better sap than the sap he gives: Watered by his Word, nurtured by his body and blood, filled with the Holy Spirit, you cannot help but bear fruit that is pleasing to the Lord. You'll be bearing fruit even when you don't think you are. "Whoever abides in me" Jesus said, "he it is that bears much fruit."

This fruit may not impress the world. In fact, these works of faith are usually done quietly, secretly, without fanfare. That's the nature of good works done in faith. They don't sparkle and glitter and walk on red carpets. They don't pose for cameras flashing and smile for audiences applauding. They don't signal all their virtues. The good works proceeding from faith are usually quiet, humble, discreet, ordinary. Galatians 5, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Nothing exotic or flashy about that list, but they are all pleasing fruits to the LORD.

Grapevine is strong stuff. You can bend it like a rope, but you cannot snap it in two. And it does not easily let go of whatever it is holding onto. The vine does not easily let go of its branches. Isn't that a great image for the faithfulness of Jesus? It's not in the nature of Jesus to let go of us and cut us off. 2 Timothy 2, "If we are faithless, He remains faithful, for He cannot deny Himself" (v. 13). He wants to give us all we need to bear good fruit. Connected to him, the fruit will produce on its own. We can hardly do otherwise. And when our branches do bear fruit, to whom belongs the glory? Of course, it belongs only to Him! Remember, branches have no life of their own. Their life flows from the vine. So, praise be to God for the sap He provides. Praise be to God for the fruit He creates.

One last thing: sometimes as Christians, way out at the end of a vine branch, we just don't feel very close or connected to Jesus, right? We feel alone, isolated, distant. Our successes seem our own successes. Our losses seem our own losses.

But if we had eyes to see, if we had eyes to see, we would follow the lines of the nubby twigs to the branches, and the branches to the long sweeping limbs, and the limbs down to the central trunk, deeply rooted.

"I am the vine" said Jesus. "You are the branches." "Behold, I am with you always." Thanks be to God. Amen.