

Season of EASTER



Prayers

Collect of the Day

O God, You make the minds of Your faithful to be of one will. Grant that we may love what You have commanded and desire what You promise, that among the many changes of this world our hearts may be fixed where true joys are found; through Jesus Christ, Your Son, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

Scripture Readings

Psalms 150 (antiphon v. 6)

Acts 8:26-40

1 John 4:1-11 (12-21)

John 15:1-18

Hymns

Hymn of the Day – 633

Other Hymns – 595 (FR, G), 697 (E), 474 (G), 540 (G), 691 (G), 919 (G)

In the peace and joy of the resurrection, let us pray to the Lord.

For the whole Church on earth, for all pastors and deacons, musicians, and all of Christ's people, that the Holy Spirit would give us the joy of singing the new song, a hymn of resurrection victory in Christ, our Saviour: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For the Holy Spirit that, by means of the divine Word, He would keep us connected to the true Vine, Jesus Christ, so that we may be cleansed of our sins, bear good fruit in His vineyard, and love one another: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For the blessing on the proclamation of God's Word in the missions of our synod so that, as the Ethiopian eunuch was brought into God's vineyard through the preaching of the Good News by Philip the Evangelist, more and more people may be delivered from the spirit of the antichrist that is in the world, believe in Jesus Christ, and so be saved: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For those who are in doubt or temptation through the corruption of God's Word of truth and for those who have wandered from the faith that He would break and hinder all false prophets and erring spirits who would destroy Christ's holy Church and who deny and reject that He came in the flesh to be the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the world; Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For the prime minister, the parliament, and all who make, administer or judge our laws, that our common life together in this nation might be conformed to the will of God: For the whole Church on earth, for all pastors and deacons, musicians, and all of Christ's people, that the Holy Spirit would give us the joy of singing the new song, a hymn of resurrection victory in Christ, our Saviour: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

For those who travel, for the lonely and afflicted, for those suffering from addiction, for those who mourn, and for those in need of healing, [especially _____,] that our heavenly Father would protect, nourish, sustain and restore them: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

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For those who have fallen asleep in the sure hope of the resurrection to eternal life that our gracious and merciful Lord would sustain us in that same faith and give us a portion with all His saints in the heavenly light: Lord, in Your mercy; **hear our prayer.**

Into Your hands, O Lord, we commend all for whom we pray, trusting in Your mercy, through Your Son, Jesus Christ, our Lord. **Amen.**



EASTER SERMON

FIFTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

(Series B)

APRIL 28, 2024

Sermon Text: John 15:1-8

“From the Vine to the Branches to Fruit”

Jesus the Vine . . . you the branches . . . the Father the vinedresser. This is the picture we have in today’s Gospel Reading concerning our union with Christ through faith.

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. But apart from Jesus you are dead and fruitless. And dead wood needs to be cut away. Living wood needs to be pruned back in order to produce even more fruit. And the Father’s shears are the Law by which He prunes away the old Adam, our sinful self.

You may wonder sometimes what God is up to. Why does He permit hardship and misfortune to come upon Christians? 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 we might produce even more fruit.

Look at a vineyard 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 when spring growth gives way to summer fruit, the results are apparent – much fruit. If those vines were not pruned back so hard, little fruit.

It’s the same with fruit trees. When you get up close to them you will notice they aren’t a particularly pretty sight. But they are not pruned for appearance, but for the fruit. The main branches are topped off to limit the height for the pickers. And 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. And while you probably would not want to do this to a tree in your front yard, that is precisely how you get a lot of fruit.

Now, on close examination, the life of a Christian . . . your life in particular . . . may not be a very pretty sight. At least not one you would or should brag about on some religious television network. That's because fruit trees and grape vines are not pruned for their good looks but for fruit. So, red flags should go up when you see those slick sellers of faith on TV . . . saying how wonderful their life is because God has been favourable to them.

No, 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.

Now of course, the problem our old Adam has with all this is that he 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. Pure and holy on the outside, but dead on the inside. On the other hand, the faithful believer in Christ is 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 kind of just shrivels up.

"Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing," our risen Lord says. 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 baptised 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. 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 . . . where even then you can't wait for the Benediction in order to get with the rest of your day. That's not

abiding. Nor is the – ‘Well, I’d really like to go to church today but we were out late last night’ . . . or ‘It’s my only day for family time’ . . . or ‘I’ve got issues with so-and-so’ . . . or ‘I’m feeling a little out of sorts today.’ No, abiding is diving in the deep end. It’s an organic union, a living graft, a fruitful communion where Christ feeds us and makes us fruitful.

Why are Christians in general, why are you and I in particular, not more fruitful? One reason: because we have cut ourselves off from the Source of our life. And when God applies the pruning sheers to your life and cuts away some of the idols that get in the way of your abiding in Jesus? Well, such losses in your life are just another dead branch being pruned away, another idol being kicked over, another distraction 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 that we might produce fruit.

And what is this ‘fruit’ that a person joined by faith to Jesus produces? Well, in Galatians the apostle Paul lists nine of them – “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.” And no law, St. Paul says, can produce them. Instead, they 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 nine down to one little word – ‘love.’ Love is the fruit of faith. And we’re not talking here about love as a feeling. We’re talking about love as action . . . love that lays down one’s life for another, love that gives with no regard for receiving anything back in return, love that sacrifices one’s self for the loveless. Yes, 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 Epistle Reading: “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. We are not love. And in order for us to love, we must be joined to God in Christ . . . branches grafted on to the true and living Vine. And being joined to Christ, only then will we in turn love one another as God in Christ has loved us.

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 the words that flow into your ears.

And it doesn’t just stop with you. Nice green leaves are a sign of a healthy branch. But fruit is how the branch is known. “By their fruit you will know them,” Jesus says. 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,” Jesus thus says. Notice, not really “prove to be my disciples” as the English translation of this verse puts it, but simply “be.” 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.

“No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and His love is perfected in us.” So we heard in today’s Epistle. And just as you can’t see the sap that runs from the vine to the branches but only the fruit; so, while you can’t see Christ or faith, you can see and will see the fruit – the fruit of love. Amen.