

Written Copy: John 15:1-7 “Remaining Connected to the Vine”

5th Sunday of Easter

Sunday, May 2nd, 2021

Text: John 15:1-7

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.

The text's intent

To impress upon me the importance of remaining connected to Christ like a branch needs to remain connected to the vine. He chose me to be His branch among others that make up His Church. Here I find the means of grace that flow to me through the faith they give and strengthen so that I produce fruit that gives God glory. Through the Word and Sacrament the Holy Spirit prunes me so that I remain a healthy branch that produces more fruit by better utilizing all the gifts God has given me in this life. Through the Means of Grace I am protected from the sinful disease that is rampant in the world that encourages me to serve myself instead of serving Christ. Connected to Him by faith I will increase in works that glorify Him but severed from Him I can do nothing that glorifies Him, I will wither and die.

Focus Statement:

It is Christ Himself that has called us to be a branch connected to Him the vine through our baptism where He washed us clean and made us worthy. He gives to us all that is needed for us to flourish body and soul as His gift of grace. He keeps us connected to Him through the pruning work of the Holy Spirit in Word and Sacrament. And even those who have disconnected themselves can be called back by His powerful working in the Gospel.

Function Statement:

Why it's important to know:

Bad worship habits can creep up on us and are hard to break. We can be moved by our sinful heart and the outside pressures of the world to disconnect ourselves from the source of our life of faith which is Christ by disconnecting from His Means of Grace in Word and Sacrament.

What the hearer should do as a result:

Remain willing participants connected to Christ the vine by their participation in the Means of grace so that they might grow in the production of Gospel fruit that keeps others connected to Christ, and through which He calls the lost.

Subject Sentence: Remain connected to the Vine through pruning.

Introduction: Developing Bad Habits instead of Good

Back when I was a single fella living on my own, I remember Mom and Dad, as well as other friends, upon seeing the bareness of my place, sought to brighten things up by giving me houseplants. But I never had much success with them, sooner or later they would all wither and die. Now I grant you that the loud rock and roll music that these plants had to tolerate may not have helped the cause of keeping them healthy. But the real reason for their early demise is pretty simple, I had a habit of neglecting to give them proper care.

I remember seeing an article that stated, "No one is born with a 'green thumb', you have to learn how to nurture plants." And when I was given a plant, I was also given instructions on how to care for it: how much sunlight it needs, whether or not it can be outside in warmer weather, and the all-important factor: how much water it needs. And to be honest there were times when what I'd been told went in one ear and out the other. But there were other times when I did pay attention to the instructions. I just forgot to follow through. I would leave them outside when it got too cold. I would forget to move them around so that they received the proper amount of sunlight, I would forget to water them, or I would forget that I had already watered them and end up drowning them. What I needed to do was develop a routine whereby I watered them the same time every day and move them at the same time every day. But I developed the wrong kind of habit, I habitually forgot about them.

We are creatures of habit. Exercise is best done as a habit, setting aside a time every day to work out or walk. Eating right is a habit, knowing how much to eat for each meal, and what foods to avoid. Even keeping a good balance as far as entertainment and sleep is habitual: getting in the habit of turning off the TV at a certain time to read a book instead, or play a game to exercise our minds. And of course, going to bed at a certain time every day to ensure we get the right amount of sleep. Even waking up the same time every day is better for our bodies. Unfortunately, I fail at creating and maintaining these good habits too.

Bad Habits That Disconnect Us from Christ the Vine

For me and for many of you, when COVID-19 hit and we were forced to stay at home and isolate, it had a detrimental effect on maintaining good lifestyle habits. Sheltered away in our homes, isolated, we fought off depression and boredom by eating too much of the wrong foods, watching too much TV, and exercising too little. And these bad habits have stuck with us since things have opened back up, and even though we could return to the good habits of before, we struggle to break the bad ones that we have become comfortable with

This is true in our physical lives as well as in our spiritual lives. Spending time in God's Word and spending time in worship is best seen as a habit. We get up and go to Church at the same time every Sunday partly because it has become a habit. This habitual action helps motivate us on those mornings when the sun was late to rise, when we hadn't slept well the night before, when there were other pressing things on our calendar, or even when we just don't feel like going. But once you got here, I'll bet your attitude changes. You walk in and see the friendly smiling faces of your brothers and sisters in Christ, and realize it is good to be here.

And of course, the work that the Holy Spirit does upon your heart and mine makes up for all the reasons we might want to skip. We can find all kinds of things that need to be done rather than sit down and read our Bibles at home. But when we engage in study with our brothers and sisters in Christ, the fellowship and love that is shared amongst us makes gathering together a worthwhile habit. We all share the same Spirit who speaks and applies Biblical truth differently in each of our lives. Studying God's Word with others creates a richer spiritual experience than just reading through the Bible on your own. Now reading on your own is good. A daily habit personal devotional time where you read a short Scripture verse, a commentary on it, followed up with a short prayer is a great way to start or end your day. But this contact with God's Word is best supplemented with a time of group study. Plus in a group Bible Study with your Pastor you may learn things that you never knew about certain passages, as well as have the opportunity to have questions answered.

But how easy is it to fall out of the habit of regular Worship, and regular Bible Study. The first time you miss may feel a little strange, but you get over it. Each successive time makes it easier and easier to miss the next Sunday, and harder and harder to get back into the swing of things, harder to dedicate that time in your weekly schedule, until that time slot just disappears and gets filled with other things that can seem just as important to you if not more so. And there are all kinds of things that you can argue are important, but do they really stack up when compared to spending time connected to our Lord and Savior?

Why is it important to remain connected?

Jesus gives us a great illustration as to why remaining connected to Him is so important in our Gospel Lesson. **John 15:5 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.** When you were baptized, you were connected to your Lord and Savior Jesus Christ spiritually and physically as His Spirit was poured out upon you and in you. He is the vine; you are the branch. He chose you to be a branch on His life-giving tree that is the Church, one of many who are all connected to Him like branches to the trunk of a tree through the love and faith we share. That faith that keeps us connected. But it needs to be nourished and fed just like a plant needs sunlight and water. In His Word and Sacrament He provides exactly what is needed to keep your faith alive and strong.

But one of the bad habits that has been afflicting the Church for a number of years has been accentuated by COVID-19 isolation. It is viewing my faith relationship with Christ in isolation of the gathering that is the Church. The reasoning for this bad habit goes like this: I've got my own faith relationship with Jesus and I can worship Him wherever I am and wherever I go. And that is true to some extent, you can take your Bible with you and in the privacy of your own home study His Word. You can have your own time of private worship where you sing hymns and pray. You can even read published sermons. But when you separate yourself from the encouragement and uplifting of your fellow brothers and sisters in Christ how long does that habit of personal private worship last? Just like those who buy treadmills or stationary bikes for home exercise thinking the convenience will prompt a faithful workout habit, what you miss is the motivation of others encouraging you when you are tired or don't want to do it. Soon the habit of exercising is replaced, and that treadmill soon becomes a storage area instead of a means to maintain and increase health. Soon the time you would set aside to worship gets dedicated to other things.

Exercising our spiritual faith is best done in the company of others whom our Lord has connected us to as His fellow branches. The lifting of praise to Him, and the receiving of His gifts of grace is best done when we worship together as His Church. **Hebrews 10:22-25** ²² **let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water.** ²³ **Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful.** ²⁴ **And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works,** ²⁵ **not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.** Notice that this verse is written in the plural. It's not that **you singular** are to draw near with a true heart, not **you singular** are to hold fast to the confession of hope, but **let us** stir up one another, **let us** not neglect meeting **together**.

Why do we need to worry about these things? Haven't we been sealed in baptismal faith? Jesus warns us in our Gospel Lesson **John 15:4-6** ⁴ **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.** ⁵ **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.** ⁶ **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.** In your baptism you were connected to Christ the vine. But that connection needs to be fed and nourished. He connected you to Himself not just to continue to live however you want to live, but to produce the kind of fruit that brings glory to God. When we develop a habit of neglecting our faith relationship with our Savior, we open ourselves up to becoming a branch that no longer produces fruit, no longer receives the life sustaining nourishment given in the Means of Grace. Instead your sinful heart takes over encouraging you to serve yourself and your own agenda, produce fruit for yourself rather than giving thanksgiving and praise to Him. We begin to fall away; our life of faith withers and eventually dies. And as one who once followed down

that path, I can testify that when you have separated yourself from Christ you don't realize what you have thrown away. Left to myself I was headed into that eternal fire, a worthless branch producing selfish fruits that glorified myself and the things that the world worships instead of the God who created me and saved me.

Jesus' Work to Connect Us and Keep Us Connected

So how did I become reconnected to the vine that is my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ? Well, it wasn't any decision of my own. I was dead in my trespasses and sins. Even though I was not enjoying life I couldn't see any way out. That's when the Holy Spirit given to me in my baptism reconnected me to my life-giving Savior through the preaching of the Law and the Gospel. He showed me that my life apart from Him stunk. Then He pointed me back to the Savior who had never left me, even though I had left Him. He had given His life on the cross to remove all my sinfulness. He poured that special unconditional and sacrificial love that originally came to me in baptism back into my heart and life. He called me back to faith through His Word. His Spirit reconnected me to Christ the vine a miraculous way that only He could do. He changed my heart from serving myself to be a living sacrifice for Him. He moved me to establish once again a habit of regular worship and study of His Word and participation in the Sacrament. He did all that for me, because He loved me so much, He gave His life for me so that I would not be separated eternally from Him forever. And He is doing the same thing here today for you too.

The Father is at work to prevent you from falling away as I once did. He does this through the process of pruning, otherwise known as Confession prompted by His Law, and the Absolution that is His Gospel. He points to all the ways you fail to produce fruits of love toward Him and toward one another. He points to all the sinful works and attitudes that, left to themselves would spread the disease of habitual sin that can result in unbelief. He points to our bad habits and then moves us to change, by the power of the Gospel, in which He assures us that all of them have been forgiven by Jesus' death and resurrection. And as faith is renewed in our life, the Spirit moves us to replace bad sinful habits with those that serve to produce fruit that brings glory to God and not to us. Connected to Christ as a branch is connected to the vine His sacrificial and unconditional love flows freely and abundantly into your heart and mine. And with that love we can produce one of the finest fruits that brings glory to our Savior, we can forgive one another just as He has forgiven you and me.

Conclusion

There is the story of a Pastor that went to visit a longtime member who had fell into the habit of staying home from Sunday worship. When the man answered the door and saw it was the Pastor he said, "You can come in, but I don't want to hear a word about my missing Church. I can worship Jesus here in the comfort of my own home just fine." So the Pastor walked in and sat down in front of the fire with the man. They both sat silently for a bit. Then the Pastor got up and moved one of the logs away from the fire. It soon began to smolder and went out. They both sat in silence for a time. Then the Pastor picked the log back up and replaced it on the fire where it began to burn again. The man looked at him and said, "I understand. I'll see you there this Sunday."

There were plenty of bad habits I developed when I was a single guy, worse than just allowing plants to die. I allowed myself to fall away from my Savior by separating myself from His life-giving Word and Sacrament. But He gave His life for me to keep me from spending my eternity apart from Him. And He used the setting of Corporate Worship to call me back, reconnected me, a withered branch, to His life-giving vine of faith. And in the setting of studying His Word and partaking of His Sacrament He made that faith once again a living fire within me. Gathered here with you He continues to work to keep me from falling away again. He is doing the same work in your life today. He is pouring that life-giving love and faith into you because you are His branch connected to Him, the vine in your baptism. And your worshipful response helps to ignite and fan the flame of faith in me and those around you. The Spirit promises to be presence among us when we gather as His Church in way He is not when we worship at home. Some of you may still need to join us on the internet due to health reasons. But just know we are anxious for your return. We love you and want to join with you once again as branches to Christ vine, to help fan the flame of faith in your life. Amen.