

"Stay Connected"
John 15:1-8

May 6, 2012

5th Sunday of Easter

Imagine a farmer who planted corn because he admired the beauty of tall green stalks. We would think that such people were silly and obviously missing the point of farming. Farmers cultivate fields and plant crops, not to produce good looking plants, but to bring forth grain. Fruitfulness is not only important, but it is mandatory. We all know this to be true and accept it as self-evident in agricultural matters, but we sometimes ignore the fact that it is true in spiritual matters as well.

In our text for today, Jesus speaks of Himself as a Vine and we, His people, as branches. As I'm sure you know, the purpose of branches on a vine is to produce clusters of grapes. It seems simple enough. A person who plants a vine expects the branches to produce fruit.

In the same way, God expects you to bear fruit in your lives as Christians. In other words, He expects obedience from you - to live the kind of lives that He created you to live. We don't like to hear that kind of thing. We would prefer to hear only about how much God loves us. We would like to think that, because God has saved us freely because of His grace that it doesn't matter what, if anything, we do. And we often live our lives exactly that way. We think that looking like good Christians is all that is important. We think that by being confirmed, having our name put on the membership role of a church, dressing up and parking ourselves in a pew every once in a while on a Sunday morning is all that is really necessary.

If you think that (and I think there are many who do think that way as evidenced by their attitude and behavior), you are sadly mistaken. A corn stalk can be thick, stand seven or eight feet high, and have nice green leaves, but if there are no ears of corn on it, then it is an unfruitful corn stalk and is worthless to anyone who farms. In the same way, if you call yourself a Christian, and even if you associate with other Christians and are in church with other Christians, but do not produce the fruit that God desires - living the Christian life, then you are an unfruitful branch on the Vine of Christ.

Jesus issues a severe warning for such pseudo-branches -- those that look good but have no fruit. He speaks of His Father as the vinedresser and says of Him, "Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away." To be a Christian in appearance only may be socially acceptable and make you feel that you have done your religious duty, but Jesus says that you will be cut off from Him. As He said in the Gospel of Matthew, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." Such people will be cut off from God forever in hell.

Such a warning may lead you in one of two directions. Some of you may become self-righteous. When you hear the words about producing fruit, you may think proudly to yourself, "That's exactly what I've been doing. I come to church every Sunday. I've taught Sunday School for years. I've served on the Board of Directors and in various offices. I help out with Thrivent service projects. Yeah, I *am* doing a pretty good job producing fruit, especially when you think of some members of this church who never show up or just show up for church but never help out." Kind of sounds like the prayer of the Pharisee in Jesus' parable about the Pharisee and the publican, doesn't it?

The other reaction may be just the opposite - despair. You know that Jesus wants you to be a fruitful Christian, but all you can see is your failures and shortcomings in this area. You feel that you haven't been a very fruitful Christian because you haven't accomplished anything great for the Kingdom of God. You've led a very ordinary life as a common church member. Not only have you not done anything great, but you have often sinned and not lived the life that God expects from you. You feel that you need to try harder in your daily walk with the Lord, but something always gets in the way.

Both of these reactions take us in the wrong direction. They focus the attention on us and our efforts. Imagine if a cornstalk could think or speak and it bragged about what wonderful green leaves were on it, even though there were no ears of corn on it. Or, imagine if it felt bad because, try as hard as it might, it couldn't come up with any ears of corn on its own. Both would be foolish. A corn stalk

must produce corn, not leaves, and it can't do it on its own. It's only by having a strong root system which allows it to draw up the water and nutrients it needs to produce corn.

Jesus says the same thing is true about us. He says, "As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you [bear fruit], unless you abide in me." You cannot lead the life that God wants you to live on your own. You cannot produce the fruit - the good works - that He desires by yourself. And, if you proudly think you are, you really aren't. Any good work that you attempt to produce on your own is not pleasing or acceptable to God.

It is only by being attached to the Vine - the Root - Jesus Christ - that you are able to be alive and lead the fruitful life that God desires you to live. And it is only by God's grace that you are attached to this Vine in the first place. In nature, a branch does not come along and attach itself to a vine, but, rather, a vine produces branches. In the same way, you did not come along and attach yourself to Christ, the Vine because of your outstanding moral character, your extraordinary works of service, or anything else. People tend to think that way. They say, "Well, after all, I have accomplished something which God will approve of and in view of which He will show me mercy." That's totally false. You did not and cannot earn the privilege of attachment to the Vine by producing fruit. No branch grows grapes so that it may be attached to the vine; being attached to the vine must come first before any fruit is produced. In the same way, you cannot become a Christian by living the Christian life; you live the Christian life after He has made you a Christian.

So Jesus says, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you." In other words, Jesus is saying, "Becoming my disciple has already been taken care of. You are clean. You are not clean by virtue of your character or because you have done good things. You are already clean - before the production of any fruit - because I have made you clean through the Word of the Gospel."

The Word of God declares that you are clean - forgiven of all your sins before God - solely for the sake of Jesus Christ and His suffering, death, and resurrection in your place. Purely by God's grace you have been grafted into the Vine that is Christ and clothed in His purity which is given to you

as your own in Holy Baptism. When you lay hold of that Word by faith, it creates in you - through the Holy Spirit who works through it - a new heart and new thoughts. You don't have to earn anything by your works at all.

Most of us have no trouble accepting the fact that it is by God's grace that we are attached to the Vine - that is, forgiven and saved. We emphasize that quite a bit as Lutherans. But many think that, once we are forgiven and saved by God's grace, it is then up to us to "bear fruit" on our own. Therefore, we look around for "religious" ways to please God and try our hardest to do them. We try to do outstanding works of kindness and charity that will be recognized by others as great. When we attempt to do that on our own, we end up, as I said before, either feeling smug and self-righteous because we judge our deeds as being good, righteous, and pleasing to God on their own merit or feeling despair that we aren't doing enough good deeds or that our good deeds aren't good or religious enough.

The problem is that this is a wrong perception of bearing fruit and the Christian life. To think that God saves us by grace and then leaves us to live the Christian life on our own is as foolish as thinking that a vine would produce a branch but then the branch would be on its own to grow grapes. As all of you know, whether it is grapes or corn or anything else, the root not only produces the branches but also supplies the nutrients by which the fruit or grain is grown. Spiritually, it is the same. Jesus says, "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."

While this initially may seem to be insulting to us who pride ourselves on being self-sufficient and who want to compare our progress in fruit-bearing with others, it is really quite a freeing experience. You don't have to be fruitful on your own. All you need do, Jesus says, is to remain in Him. As a vine supplies all the nutrients necessary for a branch to produce fruit, so Jesus will provide everything necessary for you to live the fruitful life as a Christian. So, remain where He is - in His

Word where He instructs about the fruitful life and in the Sacrament where He feeds you, forgives you, and empowers you to live the fruitful life.

Then, simply live your life and allow *God* to make it fruitful. It is fruitful, not when you seek grandiose religious achievements, but when you are hearing His Word, worshiping in His House, receiving His gifts in the Sacraments, and supporting with your offerings and your efforts, the sharing of these gifts with people who do not yet have them. It is a fruitful life, not when you are doing the things that get your picture in the paper and win praise from family and friends, but when you live in the vocation in which God has placed you and take advantage of the opportunities that He places before you. When you serve other people by performing the tasks of a child, a student, a husband or wife, a father or mother, a doctor, soldier, teacher or anything else, you are producing good fruit. This is true, not because of the quality of the work, but because such tasks are done "in Christ" - at His command, with His blessing, and through His strength.

It is like when your child brings home his/her art project from school. It may not be worthy of an art museum, but it is most precious in your eyes because it is your son or daughter who has done it for you. Likewise, the most precious painting in the biggest art museum will mean nothing to you because you have no relationship with the artist.

In the same way, God delights in what you do - whether it is worshiping Him or doing good for others, not because your singing, praying, and listening are so great or because the deeds that you do are worthy of front page news. No one else may care or even notice them. However, God delights in them because you are His son or daughter in Christ and, because of that relationship, your deeds are considered to be "good fruit."

Likewise, the most wonderful acts of charity and kindness which impress the world are not pleasing to God if they are done apart from Christ for Jesus says, "apart from me you can do nothing." And the book of Hebrews says, "Without faith it is impossible to please God." Martin Luther once said concerning this, "Therefore, the point is to judge the work by the motive behind it, not by the kind of work it is. What is done - whether great or small, much or little - is not important; all

depends on the source and foundation from which the work flows....If a person is in Christ, then the work, be it as big or little as it will, is a good fruit; for whoever remains in Him must bear much fruit, and all such works are precious grapes, even though sin creeps in now and then and there are false steps." (Luther, 24, p.233)

Whether you are a farmer or a gardener, you know that it is not the quality or appearance of the branches or the stalks that is important, but a strong root system and plenty of nutrients. If those things are in place, then it will be a fruitful harvest. In the same way, to be a fruitful Christian, it is not whether you look like a Christian or not or whether your deeds seem good enough. It will be because you, as the branches, are in the true Vine, Christ, drawing your strength from Him. Remain in Him and your life will indeed be a fruitful harvest. Amen.