

"Healthy Fruitful Branches" John 15:1-8

May 3, 2015

5th Sunday of Easter – Confirmation Day

Today is Confirmation Day in this congregation. It is an important day in the lives of these young people. We know that it means something important in their Christian lives. But what is it all about? What has it meant in the lives of these young people up until this day? What will it mean for their lives after this day? Where do we find the answers to these questions? We could go to our catechisms or our text books which we have been using all year. We could look at the plaques and certificates which we be given at the reception after church. But I prefer go to a different source for information about our Christians lives. I prefer to go to an orchard, a vineyard, or any other place where fruit grows for that's where Jesus goes in our Gospel reading for today to teach us about our lives as Christians.

In growing fruit, where do we start? We start with the vine or the tree. What is the main purpose of a fruit tree or vine? It is not to produce pretty buds or flowers or even to produce a source of shade. The main purpose is to grow fruit. The tree or the vine provide the nutrients and the support while the branches produce and display the fruit.

The only way for the branches of an apple tree to produce apples or the branches of a grape vine to produce grapes is for these branches to be connected to the tree or the vine. The tree or the vine gives life to the branches and provides all the necessary nutrients for the branches to produce fruit. Branches, no matter how green or healthy they may appear, can never produce fruit by themselves.

Branches that are producing fruit are trimmed and pruned, cutting away unnecessary stuff, so that the branches may produce even more fruit. Branches that consistently do not produce fruit are

cut down and taken away. Branches that are disconnected from the tree or vine wither away and are gathered up to be burned.

Now all of this is pretty much common sense knowledge if you know anything at all about how to grow things. Knowing all this, your advice to branches (assuming that inanimate objects can take advice) would be stay connected to the tree or the vine to receive the life giving nutrients and to produce fruit. Becoming disconnected from the tree or vine and trying to go at it alone is a very bad choice for branches (assuming that inanimate objects can make choices).

It is this scenario to which Jesus compares His relationship to us and our relationship to Him. He sets up the comparison quite clearly. He says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser (or farmer)." He brings us into it just a few verses later when He says, "I am the vine; you are the branches."

Unlike branches on real life trees and vines, we come into this world apart from Jesus, the true vine. We are like dried, dead branches at birth with no life in us and no ability to produce the fruit which God desires – trust in Him, worship of Him, and good works done in His name to serve other people.

Yet God grafted you into the true Vine, Jesus Christ. He gave you life through the forgiveness for all of your sins which He earned for you by dying on the cross. He has given you the nutrients necessary to live a new life which He guaranteed for you by coming out of the tomb alive so that you can produce the fruit God desires.

But that didn't happen today. Many people think that Confirmation Day is a time when young people become Christians or at least "real" Christians – communicant members of a congregation. This is the day when young people receive the Holy Spirit and begin a new life, producing fruit which God desires, just like the adults do.

But none of that is true. Nolan and Mackenzie, like your siblings, parents, and grandparents before you, you became living branches in the true Vine, Jesus Christ, when you were baptized.

That's when God grafted you into the vine. You received new life. You were washed clean of all your sin. You were given the Holy Spirit who created faith in your heart.

What is Confirmation Day then? It is not a time to become a Christian. You were then and are now fully a Christian. It is not a time to receive faith, but to confess the faith given to you at baptism which you could not confess then. It is not a time to receive the Holy Spirit, but to be renewed in the Holy Spirit given to you at your Baptism. It is not a time to become a branch in the true Vine, Jesus, but to consider what kind of branch you have been, are now, and desire, with the help of God, to be in the future.

What kind of branch are you? Are you producing the fruit God desires – complete trust in Him, regular worship of Him, and frequent good works done in His name to serve other people? Is that what you have done in the past? Is it what you intend to do in the future? If not, pay close attention the rather harsh words of warning Jesus has for those branches that are not producing fruit. The Father will take him or her away. Those branches which have separated themselves from the Vine, Jesus, will be gathered up and burned in fire.

Jesus' words of hope and promise for unfruitful branches are quite simple: stay connected to me. As He puts it, "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. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." The big question is HOW you stay connected to Jesus? We have no more confirmation classes, no more memory work, and no more sermon studies. You've met all the requirements to be confirmed this day. You have nothing more that you HAVE to do. So what do you do from now on?

You may think, since confirmation class is over, that it will be easy now. The exact opposite will be true. It is going to get very difficult from now on. Although Jesus will never ever let you go, there will be forces which will try to tear you from the true Vine, Jesus. Some of these forces will be bad: temptations to doubt or disbelieve the teachings of the faith you confess today; temptations to

go along with the crowd in sinful behavior in the areas of sex, alcohol, drugs, contrary to the practice of the faith which you vow to do today, and so on.

But some of the forces will be good things which are not sinful in and of themselves: sports, clubs, school activities, entertainment, friends, and many other things. These are things which will not so much get you to deny your faith, but to drift away from it. In that way, they are much more sly and tricky than blatantly evil things.

Some would like to debate what is really bad or not bad and how much of a good thing is too much. Ultimately, it doesn't matter. Any branch that does not bear fruit or disconnects himself from the Vine, Jesus, will be taken away and tossed into the fire. The solution to this is not simply to try harder to resist evil or limit the activities on your schedule. The only way to stay connected to Jesus is to be where Jesus is, distributing His gifts, so that you may have a vibrant spiritual life and produce much fruit.

Of course, Jesus is everywhere. But Jesus' omnipresence is not what helps us. It is Jesus' specific presence here which helps us. Jesus has promised, "For where two or three gather in my name, there am I with them." (Matthew 18:20) We begin Divine Service here every Sunday in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – the same words spoken over each of us in Holy Baptism – as we recall the gifts given to us in baptism: washing away of sin, new birth to a new life, and the presence of the Holy Spirit to lead and empower our lives. After a long week of temptation and pressure, this renews our connection to Christ.

Here we hear the Word of God to keep us in Christ. His Word in the Confession and the reading and preaching of the Law calls each of us to consider that our connection to Christ could slip away because of that sin and calls us to repentance. His Word in the Absolution and the reading and preaching of the Gospel – the Good News – gives what it promises: forgiveness of sin and reaffirming our connection to Christ.

Here we experience our connection to Christ in the most intimate and special way. We receive Jesus Himself into us through His body and blood given to us in bread and wine. Our connection to Christ and to one another is strengthened and we are empowered, as we leave the sanctuary, to produce much fruit to the glory of God and for the benefit of our neighbor.

Proud parents and relatives and supportive church members and friends think I'm probably talking just to you and are secretly thinking, "Yeah, pastor, you tell 'em" – but I'm not. I'm speaking to each and every person here – including myself – because the struggle to abide in Jesus is not just for confirmands, but for every Christian, from newly baptized infant to aging adult. The warning against not producing fruit and disconnecting one's self from Jesus is spoken to all. The gifts of God for keeping that connection to Christ strong – His Word and Sacraments – Baptism and the Lord's Supper – are available for all. The call to produce fruit is said to all. So remember Jesus' words: "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." Without Jesus, you can do nothing. Continuing to be in the true Vine, Jesus, will make you living and fruitful branches able to produce the fruit which He desires. Nolan and Mackenzie, Jesus has connected you to Him in baptism, as He has the other people here. He has strengthened that connection through instruction in His Word which we have enjoyed together, especially the past two years. What I say to you, I say to all: continue to use His gifts to stay connected to Jesus that you may bear much fruit, not only in what you say and do on this, your Confirmation Day, but also for the rest of your lives. Amen.