



## Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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A Stephen Ministry Congregation

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**Fifth Sunday of Easter**

**May 3, 2015**

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### **“I am the Vine; You are the Branches ”**

*(John 15:1-8)*

Rev. David K. Groth

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. 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. Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. 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, for apart from me you can do nothing. 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. If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.(Jn.15:1-8)*

**COLLECT:** 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**

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Gus and Gertrude Kiess were wonderful friends of the family. They owned a nursery outside of Chicago, and moved to Delavan when Gus retired. They spent a portion of every year in Germany, their homeland. When I was confirmed, Gus gave me this beautiful little pair of pruning shears as a confirmation gift and when I graduated from high school he gave me this wonderful garden saw, also from Germany. I remember thinking of them as odd gifts, but I'm glad to have them now. They're really good tools, and they remind me of Gus who was a wizard with these. Trees were his life; he knew just where to cut. It was part art, part science, but he made it look so easy. Watching Gus prune was like watching Julia Childs cook.

Gus carried tools like these around in the trunk of his car, because he couldn't stand the sight of a poorly pruned tree. Now and then he would pull over and just go to town on somebody's tree. Branches rained to the ground. Unfortunately, the people hiding behind their curtains didn't know he was an expert doing free work for them. More than once he was chased off. One guy threatened to call the police.

I think of Gus when I hear Jesus say, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch of mine that does not bear fruit he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Jesus is tapping into a well-known Old Testament metaphor that speaks of God's people Israel as a vineyard. Isaiah 5, "The Vineyard of the Lord is the house of Israel." Jeremiah 2, "I planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock." In Ezekiel 19, "Israel is a luxuriant vine".

And in Hosea 10, “Thou didst bring a vine out of Egypt.”

The vine represented Jewish identity. Vines were on their coins. Vines made of gold were running across the front wall of the temple of Jerusalem. It was the very symbol of God’s people Israel, but not one in which they could take much comfort. You see, it was usually a bad news metaphor. It was Law, not Gospel. It showed them their sin, not God’s salvation.

Back to Isaiah, “What more could I have done for my vineyard than I have done for it? When I looked for good grapes, why did it yield only bad?”

Back to Jeremiah, “I had planted you like a choice vine of sound and reliable stock. How then did you turn against me into a corrupt and wild vine?” (v. 21).

Back to Ezekiel: Is the wood of a vine useful? Do you make pegs from it with which to construct your homes? Does it even serve as good fire wood?

The vine was the very symbol of Israel, but it was a Law metaphor, not Gospel.

Now back to our text. Jesus looks at his disciples and says, “I am the true vine.” First, there’s the great “I am”, right, the name God revealed to Moses on top of Sinai. So Jesus equates himself with God, identifies himself as Yahweh. Second, he says I am the true vine, not a counterfeit or pretend vine. Not a wild vine that looks like the real thing but doesn’t produce any fruit. “I am the true vine.” I’m sure that stung because it means Israel is not the true vine, and has not lived up to what a vine should be. The proof is in the fruit, or lack thereof.

Therefore Jesus continues: “My Father . . . cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.” Who are these fruitless branches attached to Christ the vine? Today they are Christians in name only. They were baptized, maybe 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. They degenerated into wild, fruitless offshoots. Their love for Jesus grew cold and they only adhere outwardly if at all. They are spiritual wrecks.

There are leaves on the vine. There's growth, maybe even luxuriant growth . . . but there's no fruit, no good works.

Now, they may *think* there is fruit. They may point to a whole litany of good works. The world might even recognize and applaud their good works. But in the eyes of Jesus, there's no fruit, because it's not born of faith. They are not attached to the true Vine. Remember what he said? "Apart from me you can do nothing." Hebrews 11:6 clarifies: "Without faith it is impossible to please God." 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 that people assume will make God smile down on them, all that philanthropy, without faith none of it counts as good fruit. It might get them into the feel good part of the newspapers, but it won't get them into the Kingdom of Heaven.

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.

Conversely, where there is faith, there will be fruit. Where there is faith, there will be good works done in gratitude. James challenges his readers, "Show me your faith without works" he writes (2:18). It's impossible. Faith always results in works.

Now these works might not impress to the world. In fact, they are usually done quietly, privately, without fanfare or even recognition. That's the nature of good works done in faith. They don't sparkle and glitter. They don't demand recognition and thanks. No, the good works proceeding from faith are much quieter in nature . . . humble, plain, and often discreet. Galatians 5, "The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control." Nothing very exotic about that list!

I sat behind Karen Schempf in school chapel on Wednesday. Karen is our Kindergarten teacher. She was sitting next to one of our second graders whose own mother died last year of cancer. Not members of Good Shepherd,

the little girl had been home schooled. That's no longer possible, so the dad was looking for a loving Christian environment. And we're so glad they chose us. She's a delightful little girl. And this is when our school does its best work. It's in the darkness that the light of the Gospel shines the brightest. And we don't have to hide it.

In any case, that little girl snuggled up to Mrs. Schempf and they shared the song book and sang together and prayed together and worshipped together. And I thought to myself, this makes it all worthwhile, the bills, the insurance, the disgruntled, sometimes even threatening school parents. And in terms of good works, what Mrs. Schempf did, it wasn't a big deal, right . . . unless you're that little girl who misses her mom. They probably won't name a bridge after Mrs. Schempf. In fact, I doubt anyone else noticed it. But that is a good and pleasing fruit before the Lord. Luther wrote, "The point is to judge the work by the motive, not by the kind of work it is" (LW 24, p. 232). Is the motive to manipulate God? Or is the motive to thank and praise God and serve as his hands and feet in the world?

Therefore, "Remain in me" Jesus says. Stay connected. If you're going to produce any fruit, you're going to need the life-giving, life-sustaining sap from the true vine. Watered by his Word, nurtured by his body and blood, and filled with the Holy Spirit—that's when we start living for him rather than for ourselves.

Any simple gardener knows that if a branch is cut off from the vine, it's only a matter of time before it withers and dies. With this image, Jesus is teaching the same thing that he did with sheep/shepherd image. Remember, a lamb separated from the flock is called lost. It doesn't thrive out there alone in the wilderness. Branches don't live apart from Christ. "I am the Vine; you are the branches. Apart from me, you can do nothing."

Jesus goes on. Some branches are bearing fruit, but they could bear more if they were pruned. So the snipping begins . . . to allow in more sunlight, to cut off damaged branches, to cut back branches that are growing where they

shouldn't. The Greek for "prune" literally means cleanses. And in the original Greek it's a little word play. God "cleans away" the dead branches and "cleans up" the living branches, so they bear more fruit." He says to his disciples, "You are clean because of the Word." It's the Word that cleans us up through a life of daily repentance. When Gus was finished with a tree, it looked clean and full of potential.

In our lives, daily repentance doesn't feel good. It hurts. Hebrews 12, "No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." That is, it produces fruit.

These are dangerous tools in the hands of people who don't really know what they're doing, not to themselves but to the trees and vines. But our Heavenly Father is the one doing the pruning. He doesn't make mistakes. And what he cuts away is out of love, not anger.

Still, 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 setbacks and to suffering and persecution. It hurts, it stinks, but it can be really good for us.

Finally, this is a passage that also offers great comfort. For the first time, really, Jesus turns a Law metaphor into Gospel. "I am the true vine." That is, as a Christian, you are not growing out of something wild and degenerate, something false and doomed. You are a branch of the true vine. When you were baptized you were grafted onto Christ the true vine. That's grace! And there's no better sap than the sap he gives: his Word, his Supper, his Holy Spirit. "Whoever abides in me" Jesus said, "he it is that

bears much fruit.”

Moreover, this vine will not easily let go of his branches. Have you ever pulled wild grapevine off of a tree? With some tugging they come down, but at some point, you need to cut it off at the base. You can't snap a vine with your bare hands. It's like rope. How much more so will the true vine not let go of you and me, his branches. Isn't that a great image for God's faithfulness to us? He does not want to let us go. He is faithful to us. He wants to feed us. He wants to give us what's flowing through him . . . his own blood. All this, so we can bear God-pleasing fruit.

One last thing: sometimes as Christians we don't feel connected to Christ, right? We feel alone, isolated, distant even. Our triumphs seem our own triumphs. Our loss seems our own loss.

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.” Amen.

