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St. John's & Immanuel Lutheran Churches – Kimball, NE & Burns, WY

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

May 3, 2015

Text: John 15:1–8

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

Grace be to you and peace from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

One of the peculiarities of living in this point in history is that we no longer live according to the rhythms and patterns of life or the natural cycles of creation. Through our advanced technology we have overcome the limitations imposed upon by light and darkness or the cycles of the seasons: spring leading to summer, summer to fall, fall to winter, and then over again. Though we live in a rural part of the country, our lives generally follow the pattern of an industrial society. Our high-tech modern-life makes it all the more difficult to understand and appreciate the beauty behind Jesus' use of the agricultural image of the vine and the branches.

John 15 records one of the Lord's famous 7 "I am" statements. Last week, it was "I am the good shepherd." This week our Lord says, "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser" (vs. 1). And then in vs. 5, Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches." Our relationship to God the Father and His holy Son is beautifully described in the image of a vinedresser tending a vineyard filled with vines and branches.

It's an agricultural image which would have resonated well with an agricultural society like 1st century Israel. The beauty and intimacy of such an image is difficult for us to see. Our images and metaphors come more from factories and mass production, computers, and virtual technologies. Jesus didn't say His Father is the computer programmer, nor did He say that He's the hard drive and we're the hard ware connected via high capacity cables. I'm not suggesting that one society is superior to the other or that one way of life is nobler than another. But we need to understand the limitations imposed upon us by our particular time in history.

To understand what Jesus is saying we need to engage our imagination. In your mind's eye, you need to see a large, lush vineyard filled with grape vines bursting full with beautiful, succulent bunches of grapes. Imagine a full sun, blue skies, and a

gentle breeze. In that rather ideal setting, insert a strong man with a large hat and sharp pruning shears. He's inspecting the vines, caressing them individually as if he knew each and every cluster personally. Well, that's how I imagine it. I'm one of those moderns who hasn't lived on a farm or ranch, much less a vineyard.

At any rate, we need to start with such an image in our minds. The vinedresser, who represents God the Father, tends and cares for His precious vineyard. Listen to what He does, according to vs. 2, "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." This is where it gets even more difficult for me. In my limited experience as a gardener, I haven't done much pruning. Maybe that's why my harvests aren't that good! The purpose of pruning, however, is the removal of sick or dead branches so that the vitality of the vine can be concentrated in healthy branches resulting in a much richer harvest.

In this regard, I understand much better the computer image I mentioned earlier. I run antivirus and malware scans quite often on my computer in order to remove noxious programs so that the computer runs faster, more efficiently. What I've read about those who do know about pruning is quite striking. The vinedresser cut away so much unproductive foliage that the vine almost looks dead. A pruned grape vine looks like a rugged stick with very few branches connected to it; almost like dead sticks poking out of the ground. But the spring growth produces a harvest of thick, juicy grapes.

What Jesus is teaching us with this image is rich and vital. Notice how Jesus describes it in vs. 2, "Every branch of mine..." Jesus is talking about Christians and how God the Father takes care of those connected to Jesus through baptismal faith. Unbelievers aren't being considered here for they are dead to Christ, disconnected from His life and salvation.

God the Father prunes away, or cuts away, the dead branches of your life so that you can produce more and more fruit. In other words, God the Father, the vinedresser, cuts off everything that hinders the vital connection we, the branches, have with the Lord Jesus, the vine. All the sin-infected habits, attitudes, and actions that grow so easily in our lives are carefully, tenderly, but definitely being cut away by God the Father through the forgiveness of sins. And He undertakes a life-long, systematic pruning so that you may bear more and more fruit, or maybe it would be helpful to say, to produce richly good works of faith, love, and obedience.

Do you think the Father's pruning away the dead branches of sin, faithlessness, and disobedience is an easy thing? Think again. This is how the writer to the Hebrews describes the pruning discipline of the Father,

“⁵My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord, nor be weary when reproved by him. ⁶For the Lord disciplines the one he loves...¹⁰he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it.” (12:5-6a, 10b-11).

The pruning away of sin can be painful! But it yields the peaceful fruits of righteousness. And know this, our connection to the Lord Jesus and His eternal life grows all the richer because of the Father's work in our lives.

What the Father wants to encourage and enrich in our lives is our connection to Jesus. Five times, Jesus says, “Abide in Me.” Live in me. Draw strength and life from Me. At the end of vs. 5, Jesus says, “apart from me you can do nothing.” Stay connected to Jesus. It's that important. Listen to what Jesus says in vs. 7 Jesus declares, “If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.” To abide in Christ, the true and living Vine, means to live in Jesus' death and resurrection given to us through His holy and blessed Word. Sermons, Bible studies, catechism classes are offered for the sole purpose of keeping our Lord's branches attached to the Vine. The sacraments of Baptism, Holy Absolution, and Lord's Supper are nourishment that feeds us day in and day out.

Immanuel Throughout their young lives, Taylor and Derik have been faithful in hearing God's Word in sermon and in catechism class. Beginning today and continuing for the rest of your lives, you will be nourished with the sacramental Word as you receive Christ's body and blood for the forgiveness of sins. Your connection to Jesus will continue to grow deeper and deeper in the years to come.

This gracious work of salvation in the lives of Christ's disciples, including the discipline we endure from time to time, is evidence of our connection to Jesus. Listen again to vs. 8, “By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.” Everything God the Father is doing in your life is for your good, that you may produce the fruits of righteousness and faith. This God-glorifying fruit is produced by remaining connected to the Vine, Jesus, and through the gracious care of the Vinedresser, God the Father.

May the Lord continue to nourish us with His life-giving Word. May the Vinedresser continue to prune the branches. May the branches continually be nourished by the life-giving sap of the Vine. And may the branches bear much fruit to God's glory and honor. Dear Father in heaven, hear our prayer...

Alleluia! Christ is risen! He is risen indeed. Alleluia!

✠ In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. ✠ Amen.

Now the peace of God which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus unto life everlasting. Amen.