

Reflections on John 15:1-8
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
The Tomorrow River Lutheran Parish
May 2, 2021

15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. ³ You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ Abide in me as I abide in you. Just 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. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.

Dear People of God, Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father through our Lord Jesus Christ in his one precious Holy Spirit. Amen.

As some of you may remember, every third year we Lutherans spend five weeks in the summer on the same lesson remembering that Jesus is the bread of life. As you surely know, very few of us preachers have more than two sermons worth hearing back to back on the bread of life. So those five weeks are something of a slog for all of us. Perhaps our elders who assign the lessons have their reasons. Perhaps they know that summer attendance falls off and that if we're going to get two good sermons into our people, we better talk for five weeks... I'm not sure. I've always thought that if we were going to spend five weeks on a lesson, this lesson on the vine and the branches would be a better candidate. Let the arguing commence among the people of God!

And, as an aside for the members of Peace, this theme of vines and branches is the dominant scriptural theme in our sanctuary. It's in the ironwork of the communion rail from the old church, it's in the stands for the altar candles and the Christ candle, it's the theme of the stained glass window over the altar. Those who came before us in the faith in this place commend this lesson and these truths to us. Sermons are often forgotten

before we get to our cars. Banners fade and are replaced. But those who came before us and built our church intend that we remember this lesson in our bones and that we rehearse it every single time we gather.

I will tell you that for me this lesson is in the same category as the Catechism and the Lord's Prayer and the first chapter of John, a source of truth and inspiration and correction that seems to have no bottom, no limit.

However, it may be that some of us are so far removed from the realities and ways of vine dressing that we have trouble even entering the text. Let's fix that first!

Pastor Gretchen and I were newly married when we went off on our internships. In those years, seminary was a four-year enterprise. Two years of classroom instruction followed by a year of internship in a Lutheran congregation and then sealed with the final year of classroom work. The two of us were assigned to two different congregations in Jamestown, New York. We had only just started when we learned that there would be three of us coming back to seminary for our senior year. We were pretty young and very poor and very scared and very excited.

As it turned out, it was quite a difficult pregnancy. Gretchen was on full bed rest for the last three months. And mostly what we did – when I wasn't working – was drive back and forth between our tiny little upstairs apartment and the Children's Hospital of Buffalo 80 miles away. The drive was lovely: straight north from Jamestown on New York State Highway 60 and then northeast on I-90 along the south shore of Lake Erie. There is no particular reason that you should care about this except that our route took us through the heart of Welch's Grape Juice country. And on those drives, we got quite an education! There were times in the summer when the heat and the humidity and overpowering smell of Concord grapes made us feel like we were swimming in grape juice concentrate. That's as close as I can get it for you, marinating in purple grape juice mile after mile after glorious mile. It's a good memory from a good but difficult time.

We also learned about pruning. During the dormant season, the vine dressers go into the vineyards and prune the vines. If you didn't know what you were looking at you would be sure that the vineyards had been vandalized. You would be sure that the vines would never produce again. Again, I'm at a loss for words. The amount that was cut from the vines was staggering! Most of what was on the trellis before pruning was on the ground after pruning. And then it

was gathered up and it was burned so as not to provide a host for insects or pests. If you didn't know that this work was being done by farmers skilled in their craft, you would call the cops. If you didn't know that these farmers loved their vines and their land and their lives of productive service, you would think that they were violent and angry people bent on senseless destruction.

On the website, under the video of this sermon, I have a couple of videos for you that give basic information about pruning grapevines. One of them, from the Cornell University Cooperative Extension, just cavalierly tosses out that ideally the pruner wants to cut out between 80 and 90% of last year's growth. The other video, from the University of Kentucky College of Agriculture, features a demonstration in which a neglected vine is rescued and restored to productivity. A wild, beautiful, swirling, chaotic, monstrous plant is chopped back to a trunk and to two mostly bare horizontal branches. You won't believe that the plant will survive such a cutting, much less thrive. If you only have one minute, go to the end of the Kentucky video. There you will find before and after pictures of pruned grapevines. It's worth your time so that you can understand what's being said here:

15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. ² He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit... ⁶ Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.

It suddenly sounds a bit different doesn't it? This is no happy patter to feed to the second and third grade Sunday school class with a smile and a pat on each little head as we pass out the week's coloring sheet.

This is Jesus telling us about the reality of our lives in him, teaching us the rules of the road, and making extravagant promises of grace that transform everything.

This is Jesus explaining to us that some part of our suffering and pain, some of the constraints and the loss of freedom that we feel, come intentionally from God's own hand. Not all of it, to be sure! After all, we are beset on all sides by sin, the dark one, and the fallen creation; but sometimes the cuts and the losses and the limitations are the work of God. The farmer is never closer to the vine than when the knife is in his hands. And God is never closer to you than when he works

shaping and bending and cutting and tying so that you might be all that he intends.

There is something else that must be remembered today: There are two natures in each one of us striving for supremacy and control. We have our old unredeemed, self-righteous, idolatrous self that simply refuses to be quiet much less to die, and we have our new redeemed self, bestowed for Jesus' sake at our baptisms. Remember with me the fourth part of the Catechism's section on Baptism:

4. What then is the significance of such a baptism with water?

It signifies that the old person in us with all sins and evil desires is to be drowned and die through daily sorrow for sin and through repentance, and on the other hand that daily a new person is to come forth and rise up to live before God in righteousness and purity forever.

This internal division isn't something we wonder about, it's not speculative or abstract. We KNOW that we are divided between what was and is, and what is and will

be! Right now we are simultaneously saint and sinner, and each part of us hears this lesson differently!

For the old nature, this is a lesson full of threats! We are commanded to bear fruit! And if we don't, we get sent to hell! Fruitless branches get burned! Thus, I'm going to be busy. I'm going to develop and polish a list of my credentials that will demonstrate my holiness. I'm not really sure what the whole abiding in Christ deal is, but I'm going to pick a path and shoehorn Jesus into that. I'll set things up so that my sins are barely noticeable and yours are repugnant to God. I'll use the Bible and the tradition and the faith to justify myself. I'll enjoy the blessings my righteousness gives and I'll inform God that I have a future in his kingdom. Try to keep up with me!

The renewed nature hears an entirely different lesson: The Most High God has stooped low and is at work in my life. The Most High God believes that under his hands my life can mean something, can amount to something! Thanks be to God! May God be praised forever! Of course I can't do anything ultimate on my own. I've tried that. I'm poor, naked, stupid and blind! Yet God has cleansed me. Jesus has come for me and abides with me. He has given his own life for me. And his life now flows through me. And I'm simply called to abide, to remain in him. I would have to be mad to do

anything else! As an extra grace, God is at work cutting away the sinful and broken and weak parts of my life. What unspeakable hope is this? What words can describe it? I am being set free! I am being changed into who I was supposed to be before all things fell. And then the final promise: As I ask God to make me ever more fruitful, to let his life flow more completely through me, it will be done. This is something new in the word: a promise without a limitation of any kind, a blank check backed by unlimited credit. And my life, my sad broken life, with all of my mistakes and errors, can become something that glorifies God... It's too much. It's too high. And we join our Lady and the faithful in all ages in responding: Amen. Let it be so.

Two irreconcilable responses to this one lesson. The unredeemed nature hears threat and destruction while the redeemed nature hears only truth, grace and promise.

We find then, that among other things, we have been given something of a magical mirror this morning: as we listen to Jesus words we get a sense of which nature is ascendant in us today.

The old nature hears a threat and desperate to save his own life comes up with some religious plan that co-opts Jesus. This one masquerades as a Christian while

he thinks about “my life”, “my rights”, “my freedom”, “my standing”. This one cavalierly talks about “my church”, and is willing to go to war to enforce his sensibilities.

The redeemed nature hears a promise almost beyond imagining, a promise of being tended by God and filled with the very life and purpose of God. This one knows that he has been purchased by Christ at great cost and that his life belongs to Christ. This one will sacrifice much on behalf of Christ’s church and the needs of the weak and the lost.

The old nature seeks to produce works or fruit to demonstrate its own righteousness. Sometimes this one becomes so blind and lost that he comes to believe that the fruit is for him – and that the whole point of the faith is for him to be rich, smug, self-righteous, and happy. “Look at all the fruit I’ve got! I’m a way better Christian than you! If you did as I do, you could have fruit too!”

The redeemed nature understands that fruit never belongs to the branches, it’s always produced for someone else. The branch is not rewarded with fruit; the branch is rewarded by being filled with the life of the vine. The branch is simply a vehicle that the vine uses to produce fruit for someone else. That’s what it

means to be a branch! The mature Christian knows that it is more than enough to be filled with the life of Christ and that is a tremendous honor to be used by Christ to bless neighbor and community. We live in and for him. In his name we continue his work of blessing, and teaching, and healing, and loving.

For those of us gathered around this word today, we confess that we hear both voices, we hear both the promise and the threat. We confess that we are at the same time broken and redeemed. We ask the God of our baptisms to help us turn from and drown our old natures. We ask him to continue his work in us.

We confess that we are afraid of the pruning knife and at the same time so very relieved that God is at work cutting away the sins and habits and thoughts that bind us. With trepidation – and with great hope – we ask that God would do to us whatever is necessary to set us free and to make us whole. We ask that God's life would flow through us and that our lives would be a blessing to the world. We can't imagine it, but we ask that our lives would ultimately bring glory to God.

We count on his abiding with us every moment – it is our only hope. It is our highest destiny. It is the beginning of eternal life. Right here, right now. Amen.