

5th Sunday of Easter B 28 April 2024
John 15:1-8
St Peter's Lutheran Church, Elizabeth
Greg Bensted

Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

[Jesus says], '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.' Let's pray: ... Amen.

Every time I climb aboard an aeroplane, I'm reminded that I'm completely dependent on those who service and inspect the aircraft, and on the expertise of those flying it. I have to rely completely on a machine that's way too heavy to be hurtling through the air and will definitely succumb to the force of gravity should the engines fail. And when you transfer all of these considerations across to a helicopter, you might be surprised to learn how very precarious things are.

I would have to say that the defining characteristic of all helicopter pilots is courage, with a dollop of faith (or craziness) thrown in for good measure. The pilot's life and that of any others on board, depend on one, small component – the nut securing the bolt that fastens the huge spinning rotor in place. Aviation mechanics call this the 'jesus' nut. It's obvious why. Without the 'jesus' nut holding everything in place, there'd be disaster. Everyone's safety depends entirely on the 'jesus' nut.

This is a modern example of what Jesus is teaching us in the reading from John's Gospel today when he says, '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' (John 15:5). You don't have to know too much about gardening to realise that any plant depends on a strong root and branch system for it to be happy and healthy.

As Christians, we need our true vine, Jesus Christ. When Jesus says, “I am the vine. You are the branches”, he’s talking about the intimate and special relationship that exists between he and us. We’re dependent on Jesus for everything we need in our daily life – from food, health, family and good friends to love, forgiveness, hope, comfort and eternal life.

Like the eunuch baptised by Philip, when we were baptised, we were grafted into the vine, Jesus. We were intimately connected to him, his death and resurrection, and receive from him all that we need to sustain our lives.

We’re connected to Jesus when we come here to worship, and when we hear his Word. It doesn’t matter how much we think we know about the Bible or how many times we’ve read it, we need the life-giving nourishment that God’s Word offers. As we read it and study it, God’s Word gives us strength for daily living.

And, we’re also joined to Jesus when we receive his body and blood in Holy Communion. We’re forgiven; refreshed and freed from the guilt of our sin.

Our faith is strengthened as we’re nourished through God’s Word and Sacrament. The Holy Spirit works through these means and enables our life in Christ to grow, to strengthen, and to keep us close to God come what may.

As branches of the true vine, Jesus, we’re kept healthy and alive because we’re connected to an ever-flowing stream of life. The translators of the New Testament have used various words to describe this connection. Whether we talk of ‘abiding’, ‘remaining’, or ‘being joined’, one thing is clear; being connected to Christ is of paramount importance. Jesus is the only way to full and everlasting life.

Think about when Matthew plants grape vines. What does he expect? He expects a crop of juicy grapes, so that we may enjoy good, flavoursome wine. So it is with us. Jesus is the vine, we are branches, and from the branches Jesus expects to find a lot of fruit. To be joined to Christ, to be a branch that’s grafted into the vine, Jesus, means to “bear fruit”. The kind of fruit that should be evident in our lives is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, humility and self-control (Galatians 5:22,23). And this shows itself in very practical ways:

- If we're joined to Christ, we look to serve the needs of others.
- If we're joined to Christ, we work towards reconciling with the person with whom we've had a disagreement.
- As a branch attached to Christ, we're always ready to offer forgiveness and friendship; we try to be understanding and helpful, and we encourage instead of being negative and critical.
- Being connected to Jesus means that we'll seek reconciliation instead of inflaming disharmony.
- It means we'll show love and patience to others irrespective of whether we think they don't deserve it.

Being joined to Jesus has practical implications for the way we live our everyday lives. This imagery of the vine, branches, and fruit, isn't some theoretical fancy.

Another thing I've learnt is that in order to receive a good crop of grapes, it's necessary for the vines to be pruned. I was amazed the first time I saw how ruthlessly this was approached. All but the main trunk and a couple of thicker branches tied to the stringer remained after pruning hands cut loose with their shears. [Matthew Lorke, you are a savage!] But I've come to understand that such brutal pruning is essential for a good harvest. And not before long, the vines look lovely again with vibrant, green leaves and bunches of grapes hanging from the new growth. [Matthew Lorke, you are a redeemed Saint!]

What Jesus wants us to understand, is that all the useless foliage in our lives needs to be cut away. This foliage might make us look attractive especially to the world, but won't in any way, help us to bear fruit that will bring glory to God.

- In business, greed, selfishness, and disregard for the feelings or needs of people might be the way to get ahead, but must be pruned to allow the fruit of generosity, kindness, and humility to grow.
- It might be acceptable to others to run down people behind their backs, or participate in some harmful act that endangers our health and leads others astray, but these must be pruned if we're to show the fruit of care, understanding, and self-control.
- We might think that it's okay to be unkind, grumpy and intolerant of other people, but these things must be pruned if we're to grow the fruit of love, peace, and patience.

To bear the kind of fruit that Jesus is looking for means to prune away all this foliage so that the Holy Spirit can encourage healthy fruit to grow – the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience and self-control.

Now, I'm not naïve. I know this is hard work. Our sinful nature prefers to be selfish and greedy. It's easier to ignore than to help. It's easier to criticise than to encourage and comfort. And we can't do this kind of pruning by ourselves. We need our heavenly Gardener, to give us the strength and the will to change. We need the Holy Spirit to help us cut out the dead wood of sin and to grow beautiful fruit. That's why it's crucial that we remain connected to the vine. From the vine, Jesus, we receive the nourishment we need to live as his disciples. We receive the forgiveness we need for our failures; we grow in our understanding of what it means to be a baptised person in everyday living.

A final illustration. A man was tired of going to church. He adopted the attitude that he didn't need to go to church to be a Christian. A few weeks went by and his pastor came to visit. They sat in the living room by the fireplace and chatted. Then the pastor took the tongs and picked up a glowing ember and placed it on the edge of the hearth. The two men watched without saying a word. The ember quickly cooled down, and a few minutes later, the pastor picked up the dead ember with his fingers and tossed it back into the fire. Immediately, it came back to life. Without another word, the pastor stood to leave. The man walked him to the door and said, "That was one of your best sermons yet, Pastor, I'll see you in church this Sunday."

We're still in the Easter season. Because the vine lives, so do the branches. The life of Christ flows to us through the Word and Sacraments. As Jesus says, 'I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit...' – the fruit of faith and good deeds. May Christ fill you all with the sweetness of his love and make you healthy, fruit-bearing branches to the glory of God. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will keep your hearts and your minds safe in Christ Jesus. Amen.