

Easter 5B 02 May 2021
John 15:1-8
St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth
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Grace and peace to you from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

"I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in me as I abide in you." Let's pray:

Some branches produce fruit and are pruned, cared for and nurtured. Some branches don't produce fruit and are removed, thrown into the fire, and burned.

Human beings tend to be creatures of productivity. We have to do stuff. For the most part, our productivity is the standard by which we measure our lives and our success. It's built into our lives everywhere. Productivity is the basis of our economic system. Those who produce are rewarded and get more. Those who don't produce are thrown away, discarded, marginalised, labelled. Within our educational system, students who do well and produce are recognised and supported while those who don't do well get lost in the system. Universities live by the mantra, "Publish or perish." In stock market circles it's, "Churn or burn." Careers and promotions are based on productivity. Productivity at some level is at the core of the debates about poverty, welfare, healthcare, and the elderly. "Those people" don't produce and our care of them often reflects what we think of them.

Dear friends, we've been conned into believing that productivity is the goal and only the fittest survive. The devil's lie says that more is better. This certainly challenges the way we view our spiritual lives and the way we think about Holy Scripture and our relationship with Jesus, doesn't it?... which brings me to this point.

Being the good Evangelical Lutherans we are, we believe that our salvation is based purely on the doctrine of justification by grace through faith, to which we contribute absolutely nothing [Ephesians 2:8,9]. And at an even deeper and more profound level, we believe in the doctrine of monergistic regeneration, which basically means that the faith which receives Jesus Christ for justification is itself the free gift of God, bestowed when he calls us [Ephesians 2:1-5]. We utterly rely on God for salvation and all things necessary to it.

So, my question is this: How come many of us believe or have been incorrectly told that pruned branches go to heaven and removed branches go to hell? Some have been led to believe that pruned branches produce so they are rewarded while non-productive branches are punished.

In that (mis)understanding, fruit, or in Lutheran language, “works” is God’s demand upon our life and the means by which we appease God. At this juncture, I would warn you to be careful not to categorise yourselves and one another into fruit bearing or non-fruit bearing branches. Such thinking is transactional and amounts to works for salvation, which is impossible. We are saved only, and I want you to hear this, we are saved only by God’s free, unconditional, and invincible grace.

Productivity or works righteousness, can’t and doesn’t create deep, abiding, intimate relationships. Jesus isn’t talking about or demanding productivity in today’s gospel. He’s offering and passionately desires connectivity, relationship, and intimacy.

Fruit or the lack thereof is a barometer of our interior life and health. It describes and reveals whether we’re living connected or disconnected lives. As human beings, we wax and wane between the two, as I’ve said before about the parable of the sheep and the goats. The distinction is well made by St Paul in Galatians 5:16-26 in which Paul distinguishes between the works of the flesh (disconnected) and the fruits of the Spirit (connected).

Paul describes *works* as a list of disastrous character flaws that result from our trying to achieve the fullness of life in our own way, that is, *according to the flesh*. Paul’s list presents a colourful collage including: fornication, witchcraft, strife, envy, and murder. Things that are hazardous to our welfare and disconnect us from Jesus.

On the other hand, Paul enumerates *fruits* of the Spirit which aren't manufactured by our deliberate efforts; rather, they're things that emerge under the guidance of the Spirit when we're connected to or abide in the Word of God - Jesus. Things like love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance. They're not the result of our frantic efforts to somehow make ourselves right; rather, they are the very rightness for which we were created, and have been bestowed on us as free gifts.

Fruit production is the natural consequence of staying connected. You can see that in long-term friendships, marriages, community loyalty. We don't choose whether or not we produce fruit. Fruit grows when we abide in and stay connected to Jesus.

I'll give you an example. Sometimes we lose touch with a particular person. We no longer know where they are, what they're doing, or what's happening in their life. One day we run into him or her. It's a bit awkward. No one's sure what to say. There's not much to talk about. There's no deep, abiding presence, the connection's been lost, and it seems as though what once was has been thrown away. Then, there're other people we run into again after ten or twenty years and the conversation immediately picks up where we left off those many years ago. Even though we were apart we never left each other. There was and remains a connection and mutual abiding that time, distance, and the circumstances of life can't sever.

"What fruit am I producing?" "How much?" "Is it an acceptable quality?" Those are good questions if we understand and ask them as questions not about the quantity of our lives but the quality of our lives. That's what Jesus is after. That's the deeper question he's asking. It's the invitation to join the conversation, jump into the game, to participate, and to be fully alive. That only happens when the life, the love, and the goodness and holiness of Christ flow in us. We become an extension of his life, love, and holiness.

It's a relationship of union just as a branch is united to the vine. We live our lives as one. This isn't just about our relationship with Jesus; it affects and is the basis for our relationships with one another also. Love for Jesus, one another, and ourselves become one love. We soon discover we're living one life and the fruit of that life and love is abundant, overflowing, and Father glorifying.

Remember, it's the Word himself – Jesus, who speaks directly to us through this parable. His whole concern is nothing less than the total reconciliation of you and me to our heavenly Father. Jesus didn't become flesh to show off his own virtuosity and give us an impossible example to measure up to. He became flesh and abides in us now to help, protect, and bring us home to his Father's house and to present us as his bride at the supper of the Lamb. Jesus wills us to be whole and happy. Abide in Jesus dear friends; receive his love in water, Word, and wine, and love one another to the glory of God the Father. Amen.

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