

## STAY CONNECTED TO THE VINE

John 15:1-8 | Fifth Sunday of Easter | April 26/29, 2012

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.”

### Juva Jesu

In the name of the true vine, Jesus Christ, dear fellow branches:

When I was a kid my dad liked to make wine. For years he bought grapes for this purpose. After some years of doing this he decided to plant his own grape vines. He planted two long rows of vines, probably 80-100 feet each. He spent a lot of time caring for those vines until they became quite productive. Then, when I was about ten years old, my parents realized there just weren't any kids on our street for me to play with. So they moved to a more kid-friendly neighborhood about a mile and a half away. Not long after this we drove by our old house. To my dad's shock the new family had cut down all his grape vines. I remember how sad he was to see those beautiful vines and all his hard work wasted.

Jesus tells us today that he is the Vine and we are the branches. Our gracious God has put in a lot of time and effort cultivating that relationship. He has grafted us into the Vine by faith. From that Vine we draw life, now and eternally. How sad it makes our heavenly Father when a branch loses its connection to the Vine! In the portion of God's Word before us today our God encourages us to **STAY CONNECTED TO THE VINE**. He planted us in that Vine. He prunes us so that we stay

healthy. He empowers us to be productive.

### I. Planted

You are all alive. No, I'm not simply stating the incredibly obvious. You know that your heart is beating and your lungs are taking in air. What I mean is, you are alive spiritually. Through faith in Jesus Christ you have a spiritual life.

How did this happen? Jesus said to his disciples, **“You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to you.”** The disciples were clean in God's sight, innocent, pure, holy, forgiven. They enjoyed this wonderful status before God because of the Word. As we know, **faith comes from hearing the message** (Romans 10:17). The Word gave them faith in Jesus. The Word grafted them into the Vine.

The same is true for us. The Spirit still works through the powerful Word of God to connect us to Jesus. He works through Word that we hear and read. He works through the Word that we see and tasted and touch in Baptism and Communion. Because of the gospel message in Word and Sacrament we know Jesus as our Savior, trust in him for forgiveness, and rely on him for every blessing.

Obviously our connection to Jesus is

crucial. Without that connection, without that faith, we are dead branches destined for the burn pile. So it's amazing how careless we can be with that connection.

We're careful about a lot of things. We carefully manage our finances. We care for our bodies through diet and exercise. We maintain our cars and homes. We work hard on our relationships with family and friends. But too often we just don't give our relationship with Jesus the kind of attention it needs. Pews sit empty. Bibles are pristine. Catechisms remain untouched for years. Even when we are in the pew or the Bible is open on our lap, we're not really listening, because there are too many more important matters to think about. On a number of occasions Jesus said, **"He who has ears to hear, let him hear."** But often, in our apathy and distractedness we just don't listen.

This is a big deal. Peter tells us to **"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ"** (2 Peter 3:18). But often our attitude is "I've heard it all before" or "I know enough." But if faith is not growing, it's dying.

What do you do with the dead branches that fall in your yard? Stack them on by the road for the city to pick up? Use them for kindling in your fire pit? They aren't good for anything else. They're dead. Jesus said, **"If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."** Those who don't remain in Jesus – unbelievers – will spend eternity in hell.

God's message to us today is clear. Jesus pleads with us, **"Remain in me."** Don't take your connection to Jesus for granted. Don't neglect your faith. Feed it with God's Word and Supper. Keep on growing in Christ. If we lose our faith in him, we lose our spiritual life. If we lose our faith in him we lose the eternity he won for us. If we lose our faith in him we lose everything.

## II. Pruned

That's why the heavenly Gardener is so diligent about pruning us. Now when you see someone pruning a plant it can easily look like he's doing more harm than good, especially when he cuts that plant back to almost nothing. And yet the gardener's goal is to preserve the plant. He wants it to remain healthy. And so he cuts away every part of the plant that hinders its growth.

That's what God does for us. He cuts away everything that hinders our growth, the things that get in the way of our relationship with Christ. His pruning tools are trouble and trial, difficulty and deprivation. Sometimes he sends financial trouble to teach us not to fall in love with earthly possessions and to rely on him to take care of us. Sometimes he allows us sickness and physical suffering to show us how fleeting life in this world is and so that we devote our time to things of eternal value. Sometimes he drives us onto our knees with suffering so that we see how weak and dependent we really are, so that we are forced to rely not on our strength, but on his.

In times like these we always ask why. Why did I get sick? Why did I lose my job? Why did my spouse leave me? Why do we have to struggle so to make ends meet? Why would a loving God allow such pain in my life? It is precisely because he loves us that he allows these things. The writer to the Hebrews tells us that God **“disciplines those he loves”** (12:6). The proverb says that **“wounds from a friend can be trusted”** (27:6). No one loves us more, no one is a greater friend than our Savior-God. He disciplines us because he loves us. He wounds us for our good. He prunes away everything in us that distracts us from Christ so that we remain spiritually strong, healthy and productive.

### III. Productive

Productive. Jesus said, **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”**

Those who remain in Jesus, that is, believers in him bear fruit. What fruit? What is Jesus talking about here?

Jesus is talking about the fruits of faith. He’s talking about the good things that we think, say and do in thanks for his love and forgiveness. When we remember what he did for us – his incarnation in the womb of the virgin, his perfect life under God’s law in our place, his sacrifice of atonement that paid for our sins, his victorious resurrection on the third day – we are moved to thank him with lives of obedience to his will. We are moved to serve him with lives of love toward him and our neighbor. These are the fruits of

faith.

Notice I said we do these things in thanks. We don’t do them to save ourselves. We don’t do them to earn anything from God. We don’t do them so that God will love us. God already loves us even though we don’t deserve it. That’s grace. Good works are the evidence of our salvation, not the cause of our salvation. Think of it this way. Grapes don’t produce grape vines. Grape vines produce grapes. Similarly, good works do not make you a Christian. But because you are a Christian, you produce good works. It’s automatic. Grape vines automatically produce grapes. Christians automatically do good works. They do this in thanks for God’s love in Christ.

Unbelievers can’t do this. No one can bear fruit apart from Christ. Only believers can produce fruits that are pleasing to God. No matter how much an unbeliever gives to charity, no matter how many hours he works in the soup kitchen, no matter how much time he volunteers in his community, he produces no real fruit. In God’s eyes his works are like that fake, plastic fruit some people have sitting in a bowl on the dining room table. Whatever does not come from faith in Christ is worthless in God’s eyes. Scripture is clear: **Without faith it is impossible to please God** (Hebrews 11:6).

What kind of fruit is pleasing to God? John the Baptist said, **“Produce fruit in keeping with repentance”** (Matthew 3:8). God loves it when we confess our sins, trust in Christ for forgiveness and turn from our sinful behavior. Jesus said, **“If you love**

**me, you will obey what I command”** (John 14:15). God loves it when we conform our lives to his will, when we refuse to treat his Ten Commandments like the Ten Suggestions. Paul wrote these words to the Galatians: **The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.** (5:22-23). God loves it when the Spirit is in the driver’s seat, empowering us to be the kind of people he wants us to be.

What is our goal in producing this kind of fruit? Jesus answers this way: **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”** It’s not about making ourselves feel good because of all the good things we are doing. It’s not about making ourselves look good to others. It’s about making God look good to others. Jesus said, **“Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good deeds and praise your Father in heaven”** (Matthew 5:16).

Apart from Jesus we can do nothing. But with him and through faith in him, we can do amazing things. As Paul said, **“I can do all things through him who gives me strength”** (Philippians 4:13). We humble branches draw our strength from the true Vine. God in his grace plants us in Jesus, prunes us for our eternal good, and empowers us to produce fruit to his glory.

What a joy it is to live that life! What a joy to be living branches in the True Vine! What a joy to thrive in Christ! My dear fellow branches, by the Spirit’s power,

stay connected to him. Amen.

**S.D.G.**