

The Fifth Sunday of Easter, April 28, 2024

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Abiding in the Fruitful Vine

John 15:1–8

Alleluia! Christ is risen!

Hear again these words of our Lord Jesus Christ from John 15: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing”** (v 5).

What do vinedressers, farmers, and gardeners all want? Pretty obvious, I think. They all want a nice harvest, a good crop. To someone who’s never worked the ground, that may sound like a simple task. It’s not. Producing a good crop is the most difficult part of the job. A row full of carrots, a loaded cherry tree, a nice cluster of grapes requires hard work, long hours, and very dirty hands. It involves planting, pruning, cutting, thinning, weeding, watering, fertilizing, and fighting off insects and disease. And even then you still have to wait and pray for the right weather—just enough rain and sun. No wonder vinedressers, farmers, and gardeners are so focused on the fruit. That’s their business. That’s how they earn a living or feed their family. They carefully cultivate their fields and tend their plants to produce the best harvest year after year.

In the Christian life . . . in your Christian life, as in farming, good fruit is important and necessary. John the Baptizer told the Pharisees and Sadducees to **“bear fruit in keeping with repentance”** (Matt 3:8). St. Paul names **“the fruit of the Spirit”** in his letter to the Galatians: **love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control** (Gal 5:22–23). As Christians, there should be and there will be good fruit hanging from our hands, our mouths, our minds. Good fruit is anything done **“in faith according to the Ten Commandments”** for God’s glory and for our neighbor’s benefit.¹ Jesus also speaks about bearing fruit in today’s reading. Actually, He gives the **“big picture”**: He says there’s a vine, there’s a vinedresser, and there are fruitful and unfruitful branches, and He explains how these all fit together. So pay attention, because it’s important for you to know your place in the vineyard, to recognize who you are, to understand how you’re connected to it.

¹ *Small Catechism*, question 163. **“What are good works in God’s sight?”**

Let's take a little tour of the vineyard, then. Take a look at the place where all this good fruit is produced. This is how it's laid out: **"I am the vine,"** Jesus said, **"and My Father is the vinedresser"** (v 1). A few verses later He adds: **"I am the vine; you are the branches"** (v 5). So it's the labor and skill of the vinedresser-Father, working on the branches—you—attached to the vine, Jesus, that brings forth good fruit. The vinedresser-Father cuts out the dead wood and trims back sickly and damaged branches so that they **"bear more fruit"** (v 2).

Good fruit is the end result, but is it the main point for us? Should we put our focus on the good fruit? Some people think so. Some think that being a Christian is simply about being a good person and doing good things. But if that were all, then I could just give you instructions on how to live your life, what to do and what not to do, and send you out to get on with the work of producing good fruit—as if all we need to do to get a good crop is to tell the branches to bear good fruit. That's not how it works!

Of course, the Christian faith does have a lot to say about how we live. For one thing, there are the Ten Commandments: you shouldn't have any other gods, misuse the Lord's name, or disregard His Word; you should honor your parents and other authorities, hurt no one, lead a chaste and decent life, not take things that aren't yours, not tell lies, and not desire what belongs to your neighbor. That's God's good and perfect Law and we do need to hear it. But the Law isn't primarily there to bring about fruit in our lives. It's there to show us our sin. It can identify a bad crop or a fruitless branch, but it won't produce any grapes. That's something a dead or sick branch can't do, even with the best instructions.

So if you focus only on the fruit, if you make the Christian faith into a moral code or instructions on how to live, then you've made a big mistake. It's a big mistake because that's not your job. Remember who you are: you are the branches, and your Father in heaven is the vinedresser. The fruit is His business. It's His work, so leave it to Him to produce the crop with whatever painful pruning or cutting He does in your life.

And notice, instead, what Jesus actually said about bearing fruit: He didn't command it; He promised it. He gave a 100% guarantee: **"Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me. I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing"** (vv 4–5).

Learn to think not like a gardener—that's the heavenly Father's job—but like a branch. And the most difficult thing about being a branch isn't bearing fruit. Producing a crop may challenge and confound the gardener, but for the branch it's easy and natural. It's

what a branch does. It's what a branch does as long as it's healthy and attached to the grapevine. It will grow grapes. No, the most difficult part of being a branch is remaining connected to the vine and undergoing the pruning. The word that Jesus used and repeated many times is the word "abide." You branches—whatever age you may be, whatever your position in life—are called to this: to abide in Jesus. It means "don't become detached from your Lord." He is the true vine and apart from Him you will bear no fruit. In fact, the good things that many people do aren't really fruit at all precisely because those people aren't connected to Him!

If a person is concerned about fruit but neglects these words of Jesus—"Abide in Me"—then he's missed the whole point. And the reason Jesus tells you to abide is because He knows exactly what you're up against. He knows that it's not easy to be a Christian. He knows that it's not easy to remain a Christian. And He knows that it won't get any easier. The devil, the world—sometimes even family and friends—and your sinful nature are against Christ and against you.

In three weeks, six of our youth will be going through the Rite of Confirmation. We will acknowledge this difficulty and these enemies. They will be asked to renounce devil, his works, and his ways (*LSB* 272). They will confess the Apostles' Creed, making a public statement, before family, friends, the congregation, and God Himself, that you're a branch of the true vine Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with the Father and the Son as one God forever. The Old and New Testament Scriptures and the teaching they contain is all about this vine. As we learn and study this Word of God, we abide in Jesus. Confirmation also involves promises. These promises are as serious as life and death. We make them not by our own power but by the grace of God in Christ Jesus, as one attached to Him. They can be boiled down to a simple question, asked by our Lord: "Do you intend to abide in Me, even to death? To remain in Me, in My Word and Sacraments, to live according to them and to confess the true Christian faith?" The answer—"I do, by the grace of God"—is a reminder that Christians are often tempted to abandon and break these promises. So we all must strive to remain in Christ.

But know this, as well, that the work of God has already connected each of you to Christ. His work is to keep you in Christ and to bring about an excellent harvest through you. The Father, the vinedresser, planted a perfect seed in the womb of the Virgin Mary. It was His Son, Jesus Christ, true vine of the human race. This vine grew and gathered branches. It wrapped around the cross for your sins, was buried in the grave, and then sprouted again on the third day to extend its reach into every corner of the earth. Abide in Him is His gracious invitation. He invites you to remain right where you are now, right where God has put you—in Him. He invites you to hear His Word, drawing strength and nourishment from Him. He invites you to take in the sap from

His veins, His blood that flowed from the cross and is present in the chalice. You are baptized, you are branches, so live as those connected to Jesus the vine. Live not in your own work but in His work, His fruit, His forgiveness.

And living in this way, you can have confidence that Christ will bear fruit in you. You can say, "If I remain in Christ, it's certain that for His sake my vocation [in home, in school, and in employment], my life, and my works are acceptable to God and are precious fruit in His sight." For He is the vine, and you are the branches, and He stretches you out into the world attached to Him, clean, forgiven, and fruitful.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

Revised from a sermon preached by Pastor Gregory for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, also Confirmation, at St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fort Wayne, Indiana, on May 6, 2012.