

Christians, You are Branches of the Vine

- I. You are Connected
- II. You are Productive
- III. You will be Pruned

¹“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ²He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^[a] so that it will be even more fruitful. ³You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵“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. ⁶If 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. ⁷If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Over the last 4 weeks, our worship services here at Mount Olive have focused on the impact that the risen Lord continues to have on our lives today. On Easter Sunday, we celebrated the fact that because Jesus rose from the grave, so will believers. The next week, Pastor Wenzel led us to see how the risen Lord addresses our real-life doubts and fears. Then Pastor Gawell taught us that the resurrection of Jesus gives us a powerful message to share with others. And last week, Pastor Priewe reminded us that Jesus lives to Shepherd his flock, including through pastors here at Mount Olive, some of whom getting pretty old

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The words that we have before us were actually spoken by Jesus to his disciples on the night before he died. But they apply to more than just 11 men gathered around Jesus in the upper room. They apply to every believer in Christ. If you believe that Jesus lived a perfect life in your place and then offered up that life on a cross for your sins, if you believe that your good standing with God is not based on what you've done for God, but on what God has done for you in Christ, then you are, by definition, a Christian. And as a Christian, you are connected to Christ. You are a member of his body. Or, as Jesus says here, you are a branch connected to the true Vine.

Now, understand two things about your status as a branch. Number one, you're not a branch because you chose to become a branch. It's not like you connected yourself to the vine. It's the other way around. You didn't choose God. Rather, he chose you. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, working through his word and the sacrament of holy baptism, Jesus connected you to himself. You might say that God the Holy Spirit grafted you into the Vine of Jesus. And number two, as branches of the Vine, you draw all your strength, all your nourishment, in fact you receive life itself from the Jesus, the Vine. Or to put it another way, with Jesus, you are alive. Without Jesus, that is, separated from Jesus, you are like a branch that is been cut off. It withers and dies and ultimately is thrown into the fire to be burned.

But understand, that's not what Jesus is saying that you are. You are alive. You are connected to the vine. In fact, this whole section of scripture is directed to people who are already Christians. Remember what Jesus said, *"I am the vine. You are the branches."* Not "You should be the branches." Or, "Here's what you need to do to become the branches." No, it's "You are." That's why the number one verb in this section, is not "do this" or "become that." Rather, it's simply "remain." In other words, "You are a branch. Now stay there. Don't move." What does Jesus say? *"Remain in me and I will remain in you."* And again, *"If you remain in me and I and you, you will bear much fruit."* And again, *"If you remain in me and my words remain in you..."* Jesus' point is this: There is nothing that you or I can do to connect ourselves to the Vine. But there are plenty of things we can do to disconnect ourselves from the Vine. Every day we are tempted to find our life, our hope, our values, in someone or something other than Jesus. We're tempted to disconnect from God's Word and disengage from the body of believers. We're tempted to cut ourselves off from the pipeline of forgiveness that God offers us in his sacrament. And before you know it, the branches that were once connected to the Vine become lifeless,

fruitless, and in the end, are thrown into the fire.

My friends, do you see why these are some of the last words that Jesus shared with his disciples before he died? If you could give your Christian children one piece of advice before you breathe your last, if you could preach the sermon for the 31 8th graders who were confirmed here at Mount Olive on Saturday, what better words of wisdom could you offer them than what Jesus says here, namely, “Christian, remain in me.” Or, as the hosts of the Kids Connection put it in the video that our children watch after chapel each month—what do they say? “Stay connected to Jesus!”

Yes, as branches of the vine, you dear Christians are connected to Jesus. But not only are you, by God’s grace, I. Connected. Jesus says you are also II. Productive. Isn’t that the promise that Jesus makes here in his word? Jesus says, “*If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit.*” (*John 15:5*) Notice, it’s not “you should bear much fruit.” Or, “Why don’t you bear more fruit?” No, Jesus is simply stating a fact. If you remain in him, you will bear much fruit. And why would Jesus say that? How does he know that? Two reasons. First, because the Bible says in Hebrews 11, *Without faith it’s impossible to please God.* (*Hebrews 11:6*) In other words, even though the atheist may do things that appear to be kind and helpful to others, by definition he couldn’t be doing those things for the right reasons, namely, out of gratitude to God for the grace he’s been shown in Jesus. Therefore his actions are not pleasing to God. That’s what Jesus means when he says “*Apart from me, you can do nothing.*” In other words, without Jesus, you can do nothing truly good.

However, the flip side of that coin is also true, namely, “*If you remain in me, you will bear much fruit.*” Why is that? Look at it this way. If you know where you stand with God, if you know that for Jesus’ sake, God has forgiven all your sins, if you know that God says you have a new identity as a dearly loved, redeemed, Spirit-filled child of God—that fact cannot help but impact your attitude, your actions, the way you live your life. What does Scripture say? *If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come* (*2 Corinthians 5:17*). In other words, it’s our connection to Christ—him in us and us in him—that changes us from the inside out. It produces in us the good works that God desires. That’s why Jesus uses the illustration of the grapevine. It’s the vine that provides the nourishment to the branches so that they can produce grapes that the gardener is looking for. And what do those grapes look like in our lives today? The Bible tells us in Galatians chapter 5. *The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy,*

peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Tell me, as you look at that list, are there any qualities that you wished you had more of? Have you ever thought to yourself, “Man, I want to be a kinder, gentler, more joyful person?” Or maybe it's your spouse or your kids or your coworkers who would like to see you displaying more of those qualities. Deep down, I think we all want to be a better person. The trouble is, too often, we think we can achieve those goals all by ourselves. We think, “If I just put my mind to it, if I read the latest self-help book, or listen to the right inspirational podcast, then I’ll produce the fruits I’m looking for. But what is Jesus say here? *“Apart from me, you can do nothing.”*”

But notice that Jesus goes on to say, *“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish and it will be given you.”* (John 15:7) In other words, if you really want to produce more fruit, if you really want to become kinder, gentler, more peaceful, then the key is not what you must do, but rather, what only Jesus can do in and through you. Let Jesus fill you up. Nourish your faith with his word and sacrament and he will produce the fruit you are looking for in your life.

But you realize, it's not just you and the people around you that want to see some good fruit in your life. That's also what God wants for you, too. And to help make that happen, Jesus says that God is going to do for you and me what every good gardener does for his grapevines. He's going to prune us. That's right, Jesus Christ says that as branches of the true Vine, you dear Christians, are I. Connected; II. You are Productive, and III. You will be Pruned.

Here in our text, we see that the gardener really does two types of cutting on the grapevine. Jesus tells us, *“He (the gardener) cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”* (John 15:2) You realize the difference, don't you? If a branch is not bearing fruit, it is good for nothing. It's cut off from the vine and thrown into the fire. But if the branch is bearing fruit, that branch is pruned, literally, it's “trimmed clean.” If you're a tomato gardener, you maybe know that you need to clip those suckers that grow in between the main branches. If you've driven through the wineries up in Door County early in the year, you know how severely they trim those vines down. In either case, the goal is the same, namely, to allow the fruitful branches to become even more fruitful.

Well, so it is with God’s pruning process for you and me. Sometimes God gets out his pruning shears. He starts lopping off pieces of our lives. Maybe we lose our job. Maybe our

health takes a turn for the worst. Maybe a close friend passes away. In each case, we find ourselves hurting. We feel like a grape vine that is just been severely pruned. But God has a purpose in spite of the pain. How does the writer to the Hebrews put it? *No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on however, it produces a harvest of righteousness for those who have been trained by it. (Hebrews 12:11-12)* That's God's purpose for the pruning he carries out in our lives. It's the purpose for the discipline he allows in our lives. His purpose is always to draw us closer to himself, so that through our connection to him, we might produce even more good fruit.

Remember that the next time you experience some hardships in your life. When it feels like something is being taken away from you. Don't say, "I think God is punishing me." (The fact is, he can't punish his believers. He's already punished Jesus in our place.) But he might be pruning you. He might be cutting away the things that have the potential to pull you away from God. Tell me, as you look at your life, are there some areas that could use a little more pruning? Things that are coming between you and God? Things that are turning your attention away from the Lord? Things that are putting a drain on your spiritual life and are keeping you from drawing the sustenance you need from the true Vine, Jesus Christ? Through his Word, God helps us identify those fruitless suckers, and with the sword of the Spirit, he gives our New Man the power to cut those suckers out of our lives. Whether it's God cutting them out by actively taking things away from us, or it's God giving us a strength to voluntarily give them up, the result is the same. More fruit, for our good and his glory. How did Jesus put it? *This is to my Father's glory that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*" (John 15:8)

My friends, the next time you see a grapevine, think to yourself, "You know, God says that's me. He connected me to the true Vine, Jesus Christ; he's producing good fruits in my life, and under his careful pruning hand, he's going to use even the trials I face in life to produce even more good fruit in my life, not for my glory, but for his. In Jesus' name. Amen.