

Fruitful Branches of the Vine Divine

Text: John 15:1-8

Very few of us have first-hand experience at raising sheep. And yet we cherish the picture painted in last week's Gospel reading as we heard Jesus say, *I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep* (John 10:11).

Many of us have worked with fruit bearing plants, and maybe even grape vines, in our garden or on our farm. But it just doesn't do much for us when we hear Jesus say, *I am the vine; you are the branches*. Why is that? Why doesn't this image give us warm fuzzies like the Good Shepherd does?

One reason is that part of the package is a good dose of Law.

When Jesus talks about being the Good Shepherd, there is a wolf who snatches and scatters the sheep, and a hired hand who runs away, but we don't really identify with them. We are the sheep that Jesus protects and leads to green pastures.

When Jesus starts talking about the vine and branches, we know we are the branches. And it's not all good news for branches. If the branch does not bear fruit it is taken away. If it does bear fruit, it is pruned. If branches do not abide in Jesus they are

thrown away, wither, thrown into the fire, and burned. Not a whole lot of warm fuzzies there.

That is the Law at work. It is not supposed to give us warm fuzzies. Its task is to make us fear God's wrath so we do not break His commands, to condemn us when we do sin, and point us to a better way.

We have all of this in our text. None of us wants to cut off, thrown into the fire, and burned. When we hear Jesus talking about abiding in Him, we are reminded of the times we have not stayed close to Him, seeking from Him alone every good gift He has to give. We are reminded that we have often sought out pleasures that are not God pleasing. Abiding in Jesus is not one of our strengths.

This recognition is what makes the Gospel so sweet! Abiding in Jesus is not one of our strengths, but it is not really about our strength. Jesus says, *apart from me you can do nothing*. Strength to bear fruit and strength to abide is in Jesus. Everything we need comes from Him.

Jesus points to His word that makes us clean. We hear that word in the Divine Service as He speaks and acts in the words of Holy Absolution forgiving you all of your sin. What Jesus does for us is the important thing, not what we do or leave undone.

Jesus points to prayer. Yes, it is something we do, but it is motivated and guided by Jesus' Spirit that lives in us – abides in us. The Holy Spirit was given to you as a gift in your Baptism, and comes to you anew every time you read and hear God's word. What the Spirit is doing in us is the important thing, not what we do.

Jesus used the literal fruit of the vine to give to His disciples, and us, His very blood for the forgiveness of sins and new life in Him. What Jesus does for us is the important thing.

Jesus came to earth to give life. At just the right time, when we were fruitless, dead-in-sin branches, Jesus Christ, true God from heaven, was planted in this world. Jesus was and is the Vine Divine, and He came to bring life to us all!

Our heavenly Father had a most unusual plan to bring us life through Jesus. The plan for life would involve death. Jesus Christ, the Son of God, would have to suffer and even, for a time, be cut off from God the Father as He took upon Himself the sin and eternal punishment of all people. The vine, Jesus, died. He was buried. But in three days, He rose from the dead. Forty days later, He ascended into heaven. And from heaven, Jesus Christ, the living Lord, has given you the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Through the Word, Baptism, and the Lord's Supper, the Spirit keeps you connected to the vine, giving you saving faith and producing the fruit of faith.

All because of what Jesus did, we remain connected to the vine and bear fruit and live forever!

God is glorified by our fruit-bearing. Jesus says in verse 8: *By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.* Jesus makes us His followers through His word, and we in turn show that we are His followers through our fruit—our attitudes, words, and actions. Knowing Jesus and living in Him affects how we talk about others, where we go, what we do with our time, how we spend our money. We live with purpose and hope. People notice we're a little different than others, and they may wonder why. And we can tell them why. We can say we're different because Jesus is our Savior and God is our loving Father. That's fruit-bearing that glorifies God.

I'm guessing that the Good Shepherd will remain more of a favorite than the Vine and branches. But there is comfort and good news in these words of Jesus. Jesus is the faithful Vine. The faith He gives us keeps us connected to Him. And He promises we will be His fruitful branches. Amen.