

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I will 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 a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. (John 15:1-8)

I’m Just a Branch

When I was a child, I loved to climb trees. I thought it was really cool to get up as high as I could. Do you remember that feeling? Most children enjoy climbing trees. My own kids do. In fact, they’ve often expressed frustration at the fact that we’ve had so few good climbing trees in our yards over the years. But of course, as an adult, I recognize an inherent danger in climbing trees: falling. There are two very large trees in our yard now. The trunks are huge. They would support the weight of our entire family and more. But not every branch that comes off those trunks is safe to climb on. Some are too small to support my weight. Some are dead and would snap off if I stepped out on them. You can think of the Christian Church as a tree – or as Jesus does in our gospel lesson for this morning, as a grapevine. The trunk is the source of strength and life. But we are not the trunk. Jesus says that we are the branches. There’s something hard about what Jesus is telling us. His picture says that I am weak and needy. No matter how strong I feel, Jesus’ picture says that I am dependent on the vine or the trunk for everything because **I am just a branch.**

I.

That’s exactly the point Jesus is making. Jesus said the words we have before us on the night before he died. The last supper was over and as they prepared to leave, Jesus had a long conversation with his disciples. He told them that he was leaving them. Then he told them that without him, they were nothing. He says that to us, too. When I look at myself, I have to understand this truth: **I’m just a branch. I have no life on my own.**

Jesus said: **“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing.”** If we’re cut off from Jesus, we can do nothing. We are nothing. But as long as we’re connected to him, we will bear much fruit. The fruit comes because life comes from the trunk or the vine. The trunk or the vine converts water and nutrients into sap and sends that sap out to feed the branch. The branch uses that sap to produce fruit.

The point is very simple: without Christ we are dead. Over at my house, I have pile of sticks that have fallen from those big trees in my yard. Many of them are quite large. But they died while they were still on the trees and eventually they broke off and fell. There’s a parallel to our congregation, indeed, to every congregation in this world. Some branches that are attached to Peace Lutheran Church are already dead. They’re still attached – they’re still listed on our membership rolls, some of us remember some of them, maybe they’re even friends or relatives. But they are dead. They stopped coming a long time ago. Without a connection to Christ, their faith has died. One day, we’ll drop them from our membership rolls, but that’s not the real tragedy. The real tragedy is that one day the Lord will gather them to be burned in the fires of hell.

Jesus warns us living believers about what happens when you cut a branch off of a fruit tree: it dies. At the moment you cut it off, it’s still green. It looks just like a live branch. It oozes sap into your hand. But without that connection to the trunk, the branch is dead. It will wither and one day God will also cast it into the fire. That’s a tragedy, because it was alive. It was bearing fruit. But if we don’t stay connected to Jesus, it won’t matter how often we’ve been here or how much we’ve done or how much we’ve given to this congregation. If we don’t remain in Christ our faith will die and we will spend eternity in hell.

Why is that true? Because we are all born as sinners. We’re born spiritually dead. Now, we are born as spiritual beings. We’re born with an immortal soul. But because we’re born sinners, that soul is cut off from

eternal life. It has no natural relationship with God. By nature, we hate God and love only ourselves. So we can only wither and die and go to hell.

But God wants us to live. So he sent his Son to pay for our sin – the sin we were born with and the sin we commit every day of our lives. Jesus died and paid for it all. Then he rose and declared to us that all our sin is erased from our record. God has forgiven us. Then God came to us in the gospel and he gave us faith in that promise. At the moment that faith first awoke in our hearts, we began to live spiritually. We were connected to the Vine, to Christ. Life now flows to us from him.

But only because we are connected to him by faith. Jesus said, **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”** How do we stay connected to him? Jesus’ words have to remain in us. That means we need to hear those words. We need to come to church regularly to hear that our Savior died and rose to give us life. We need to constantly reinforce that truth, because we do still live in this sinful world. And believe it or not there is a part of our hearts that wants to die spiritually. If you don’t come and hear about Christ, you will forget what he has taught you. Little by little, you’ll think more like the people of this world and less like Jesus, until you think that you’re going to heaven because you’re a good person and because God would never send anybody to hell anyway.

Once you reach that spot, you’re dead. You will spend eternity in hell wishing you had just taken the time to return and hear about God’s love. But it doesn’t have to be like that. God gave you: the gospel, which is his power to keep us connected to him, to keep our faith alive. Through that word, God makes everlasting promises to us: to hear our prayers, to care for us every day that we are here, to keep our faith alive, and to bring us at last to live with him forever. You are a branch. Stay connected to Christ, the vine, the source of life.

II.

God promises you that if you are connected to Jesus you will bring forth much fruit. Not just a little. Not just occasionally. You will bring forth much fruit. But fruit trees need to be taken care of. Professional fruit growers understand that pruning is absolutely necessary to get the most out of their orchards and vineyards. And it’s the same for us, too. **I’m just a branch. I need God to prune me.**

What is the fruit that Jesus is talking about here? What is he looking for? What does he promise us? The fruit of faith is a Christian life. It’s the change in our lives. It’s a change in our attitude, first of all. We may do many of the same things that unbelievers do – like caring for our children and being faithful to our spouses and being good neighbors and citizens. But our attitude is different now. We do it because we are children of God. Our faith is coming out in that new life. The more we grow in that faith, the more we’re connected to Christ, the more fruit God brings forth. It isn’t world changing stuff, most of the time. It’s living in love for each other. It’s caring for your husband or wife because God gave that person to you. It’s kindness to children and to the people around us. It’s a desire to hear the word and to understand our Lord better. The Christian life is quietly living the way Christ lived: in service to God and to each other.

Jesus said, **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit ...”** Fruit is absolutely necessary. If you have faith, you will bring forth fruit. If you don’t – if your life never changes as a result of your faith, if you never work to turn from sins that Jesus forgave, then your faith is dead. God cuts off every dead branch that bears no fruit.

But Jesus also tells us, **“every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”** As long as you live here, God is working in you – pruning you – to bring forth more fruits of faith. What is pruning? It’s cutting off extra twigs and shoots so that the sap is concentrated. Does cutting off your extra twigs sound like it would hurt? It does to me. And the truth is, sometimes God’s pruning does hurt. Every hardship we face is a part of the way God prunes our lives. The Bible teaches that God actually sends all our hardships into our lives so that they can prune us. They refine our faith so that it’s stronger. And they take away the things that work against our faith.

But pruning isn’t just suffering. It’s all the ways God removes those things that distract us and hurt us. How many times in your life have you watched a movie about wealthy people living in beautiful homes and enjoying things that you’ll never have? Have you ever wondered why you can’t have those things? My friends, if God didn’t give us that money or that house or that life, it must not be good for us. He takes away things that would undercut our fruitfulness – things that would distract from him and harm or even kill our faith.

God started pruning us at the moment that he came to us in the gospel and changed our hearts. Jesus said, **“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”** First and foremost, the word that

God speaks to us prunes away the distractions of this world and the sinful attitudes of our hearts. The gospel gives us the new life, the fruit God is looking for from us. Jesus said, **“No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.”** We can’t change our lives without God. We can’t live a Christian life without the word that God keeps preaching to us here.

Now, maybe you know people who don’t go to church, but who are decent, likeable people. Maybe you know people who don’t believe in Jesus but live better lives than many church-going Christians you know. I’m not going to deny your observation. But I am going to stand on Jesus’ words. True fruits of faith come only from faith. God gives faith and he keeps faith alive through the gospel. Christians who don’t hear the gospel put their faith in jeopardy. It is true that there are people out there who deny the faith and are still decent people. But if they have no faith in Christ, then those decent lives are not fruits of faith. God will count their fruits as fake on Judgment Day.

Does that seem harsh to you? Well, remember, even our best works and our most inspiring fruits of faith are not perfect. Even when we share Jesus’ love with someone who’s hurting, our sin still contaminates what we do. We should not get any credit for those polluted excuses for good works. But God sees the faith in our hearts, so he counts our sin smeared efforts as if Jesus himself did them. He counts them as if they were perfect. That’s the only reason that our good works give glory to God. His grace erases our sin. People without faith in Jesus don’t have that benefit.

Rather than wrestling with how hard that sounds, the point this morning is to rejoice in the gift God has given us: because we are already pruned by the gospel, because God has already transplanted us into his fruit tree and made us branches of the vine, God promises that we will bring forth much fruit. He calls us to stay connected to the gospel, the source of life and service. Through that life giving word, he will change our lives.

So, my friends, rejoice in what God has made you to be! A number of years ago, we vacationed in California. While we there, we visited several of the historic Spanish missions. At one of them, we saw grapevines that were planted by the Spanish missionaries in the 1700’s. The branches of those vines cover a whole network of walkways in the courtyard of that mission. When we traced them back to the origin, we found the trunk of a grapevine that was as big as an oak tree. As we walked under the shade of those branches, countless bunches of grapes hung down over our heads. I’ll always carry those vines in my head as a picture of what Jesus was saying here. That enormous vine that gave life to those tangled branches is Jesus. We are those branches. Millions of bunches of grapes hang from our lives, because Jesus gives us life and fruit. My friends, remain in him so that you remain alive spiritually. Remain in him so that you bring forth much fruit. Amen.