

"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. (John 15:1-5)

The True Fruit of Faith

If you were a plant, what kind of a plant would you be? Does that sound like one of those dumb questions they ask at job interviews? How do you answer a question like that? Tonight, Jesus calls us grapevines, or more specifically, he calls us branches of him, the one great grapevine. Why does he call us that? Partly, it's because his people knew all about grapevines. A few years ago, a family friend was sitting in our back yard and he noticed that we have a grapevine growing there. He called them amazing plants. He's right. Ours has shown resilience that I never would have thought possible. One of my kids gave it to my wife for Mother's Day a year or two before we left Muskegon. When we moved, one of them came to me with big puppy dog eyes and asked, "You're going to take mom's grape vine, aren't you?" Of course, I said, "Yes" and went and found a five gallon pail and dug it up and moved it here. But not to where it is now. The first year we were here, we lived in the other house. So I planted it there, only to move it again a year later. And that move killed it. Or so I thought. The branches were dry and brown and no leaves came out. But then next year, new branches sprang up and eventually produced grapes. That's the kind of plant Jesus compared us to. A plant that has life in its roots, even when that seems impossible. A plant that brings forth rich fruit. The fruit is the key, because Jesus is talking about faith. He's talking about **the true fruit of faith.**

I.

What is the true fruit of faith? Good works. The Bible uses that image over and over again. Jesus spoke the words that we have before us on the first Maundy Thursday, after the Passover was over, after he had instituted the Lord's Supper and after he had tried to explain to the disciples what was going to happen the next day. They had left the upper room and were on their way to the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus was about to lay down his life for us. Luther said, "All this he did that I should be his own and live under him in his kingdom and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness." Jesus died and rose to make us his. Being his means that we bring forth **the true fruit of faith. God wants us to bear that fruit.**

Jesus said it this way: **"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 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."** Every year, I try to do this with my wife's grapevine. I really don't know what I'm doing, so I'm not sure I'm having much effect. But after I chop a branch off of the vine, it's not going to have any grapes on it. Without the connection to the water and the nutrients in the soil, those branches are dead.

Jesus is the vine. The branches grow from him. But God cuts off every unfruitful branch. If you have no good works, God cuts you off. Now, that does not mean that good works save you. That's pretty much the default setting of the human heart. "If I'm a good person, God is going to take me to heaven." If you share the gospel with people who don't know Jesus, it won't take very long until someone tells you that they're going to heaven because they're basically a good person. If that were true, we wouldn't be talking about fruits of faith tonight. We'd be talking about fruits of works – about being good so that we get to be saved.

Our good works are a response to the fact that we are already saved. They are the fruit of faith, not the root of faith. But if we have faith, then we will bring forth good fruits. Knowing Christ always changes your life. Jesus says that if we have no change in our lives, if we can live like an unbeliever, then the Father cuts us off. In other words, he treats us unbelievers, because that's what we are.

Now, that doesn't mean that I can always see the good works my neighbor is doing. I don't know your private struggles with temptation and sin. I don't know what your life would be like if you didn't have Christ and the Holy Spirit changing you. I think that sometimes the people that we are most judgmental about, may, in fact, be waging a far greater spiritual war and in God's eyes may be bringing richer fruits than we more

“respectable” people are. But the fact remains that faith always changes our lives. If there are no fruits, there simply is no faith.

God willing, no one here tonight falls into that category. But we all should fall into the other category Jesus speaks of: **“every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.”** When I prune my wife’s grape vine, I use pruning shears with blades that slice through the little branches. Sometimes, I wonder if it hurts. Can plants feel pain? Certainly, it puts an end to growths that the plant started. But if you do it right, you increase the harvest your vine will produce. God prunes us. He trims away the distractions and the temptations. Sometimes, those things can feel like good things that we didn’t want to lose. They can feel like sprouts that we thought we were going someplace – job opportunities, friendships, chances to go places and do things. But God trims them off before they can become a distraction that weakens our faith. And sometimes, God slices right through our lives with pain and loss. Those things teach us where our real strength lies. They keep us from thinking we can take of ourselves. They force us to lean on Christ. That faith is where fruits of faith come from.

God is working in our lives. He wants us to bring forth fruits. How are we doing on that score? It seems to me that we swing wildly back and forth between thinking that we’re doing so great that God should be happy to have us and thinking that all that we do is an enormous failure and we haven’t produced any significant fruits of faith at all. Have you been on that roller coaster? Jesus said, **“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”** “Clean” here is the same word in Greek as “pruned.” God has already pruned us and made us fruitful through his word.

Jesus said some pretty harsh things to the disciples. He called them “you of little faith.” He rebuked their pride and their failure to understand him. He used the law to hammer at their sinful nature. But Jesus also told them again and again that he was the Savior, that he was going to Jerusalem to die and then to rise. That word of law and gospel pruned them. The law pulled them up short on sin. It closed off distractions and sinful thinking. It chopped off those unfruitful ways of living. But the cutting isn’t what caused the fruit. That came from the gospel, the good news. Seeing their Savior gave them life. That life welled up inside them to good works, to fruits of faith. And it is the same with us. Hearing of our sin pulls us up short. It hurts and it makes us squirm. But it cuts off temptation and distraction and death. And hearing about our Savior, knowing his love and the forgiveness he has won wells up inside us to a life of faith.

It’s worth noting where we are in the lives of the disciples when Jesus said this. Their most famous fruits of faith were still in the future. They had shown fruits of faith, but weakness and confusion and doubt were still very much a part of who they were. That very night, Jesus was going to be arrested and they were all going to run away. They were going to forget his promise to rise and hover on the verge of despair. But when he rose, when the Holy Spirit came on Pentecost and reminded them of all that Jesus had said and led them into all truth, they became the founders of the New Testament Church. Most of them died for the gospel. Did that happen overnight? Of course not! Jesus had been pruning them for three years. Jesus is pruning us every day of our lives here. In his good time, we will see the fruits, too. They are happening already, but God is not done working in us to make those fruits greater and richer until we reach heaven.

II.

That’s what we all want, right? We want to live Christian lives. But in this world, that will always be a struggle. There are so many forces lined up against us, trying to kill off the fruits of our faith. In all the years we’ve had a grapevine in our back yard, only last year did we get any grapes. The summer before, there were lots of little green grapes on the vine. But one day we went out and something had stripped them all away. Jesus doesn’t speak of animals or birds stealing the fruit. He speaks of the branches getting cut off from the vine. He promises to take care of all the other threats just as long as we stay connected to him. He promises that we will bring **the true fruits of faith. Remain in Christ to bear that fruit.**

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.”** The power to live a new life comes from Jesus. Knowing his love, knowing that he rescued us from certain death and hell, changes us. But we need to remain in him. That’s our part in our Christian lives. When it comes to conversion, we don’t have a part. God reaches into our hearts through the gospel and makes us believers. But when it comes to fruits of faith, we do have part. The new man applies all his power to fighting sin and living for Christ. But success comes by the power of the Holy Spirit. The gospel gives us the desire to live for Christ. The gospel gives us the power to live for Christ. The

gospel takes all our failures and all our feeble efforts and makes them perfect in God's sight, as if Christ himself had done them.

Remaining in Christ means staying connected to that gospel. Without it, our effort is wasted. God says that without faith, we can't please him. Without faith in Christ, all our best efforts are really all about us. They're gifts to our own egos. But in faith, we truly serve our Lord. Without faith, God sees the sin in all our works. We will never be perfect on this side of heaven. But in faith, the righteousness of Christ covers all our sin and God sees Jesus. So God sees everything that we do as righteous and perfect.

The gospel comforts us and gives us joy, even though we know we fail and sin every day. The gospel makes good works a want to instead of a have to. The gospel is the key to everything. That's why Jesus spoke these words on Maundy Thursday. That night was all about the gospel. Jesus gave us the sacrament of Holy Communion that night to keep us strong in the faith. Every time we come to the altar and receive the body and blood of Christ, we receive spiritual fuel for our lives of faith. We receive the very power of God.

Come tonight and receive that power. Then go out and live for Jesus. Maundy Thursday was a very busy night for Jesus. The conversation alone that he had with his disciples runs almost four chapters in the gospel of John. There is so much we could talk about this evening. As a Lutheran pastor, I always want to talk about communion on Maundy Thursday. It might seem like we haven't done much of that tonight. But the truth is, we've been talking about living for Jesus. Communion is the power to do that. It is the gift of Christ's body and blood in and with and under the bread and wine to assure us that our sins are washed away and to renew our strength to live for Jesus until our Lord returns. It is the visible gospel and the gospel is what keeps us united to Christ, the true vine. Come and hear it. Come and receive it. And go home and bring forth fruits of faith. Amen.