

**BRANCHES OF THE TRUE VINE**  
 Homily for the Fifth Sunday of Easter, 7 May, A.D. 2012  
 St. Paul's Lutheran Church, Sacramento, CA

**John 15:1-8** "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. Every branch that bears fruit he prunes to make it bear more fruit. 3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you. 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me. 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. 6Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers; such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. 7If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask for whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples."

Our Gospel for today presents us with a bit of drama, did you notice? It's a drama in two acts which utilizes the metaphor of a grapevine as the central character.

Act one zeroes in on a crisis with this particular vine, and act two, while it does depict a climax, yet the drama has an open-ended conclusion. So --

**BRANCHES OF THE TRUE VINE, Act One: Dead Wood**

**Scene 1. First Glance at the Problem Vine: A Fruitless Branch**

Let's set the scene.

Jesus and His disciples are walking toward the Garden of Gethsemane.

It was the last night on earth for Jesus before his crucifixion.

In the upper room which they had just left, Jesus had been talking about going away.

Now as they were walking, He perhaps paused by some grape vines.

He knows his betrayer is on the move -- Judas, one of the twelve.

He looks into the faces of the eleven who remain with him, and he knows how important it is that they "remain" in him, stay true to him, "abide" in him, no matter what happens next.

He begins to speak: "I am," he says, "the true vine..." and the drama begins.

*Enter Vinegrower: "Well look at this. This branch does not have any fruit on it."*

Now that's a problem for this vine -- a fruitless branch.

Earlier in his ministry, our Lord had made the comment, this time about a tree that lacked fruit: "... the tree is known by its fruit." (Matt. 12:33)

Not only is a tree, or a vine, known by its fruit, but a problem with its fruit -- or its lack of fruit -- is the sign of a deeper problem.

So it is with us. Jesus wasn't really talking viticulture here. He was talking about us.

The way we act, especially how we treat one another and the world around us, reveals something deeper about us.

**Act 1, Scene 2. A Closer Look at the Problem: Not Abiding in the Vine**

*Vinegrower: "Hmm. I see the problem. The branch is withered, as if it were not getting any juice from the vine. No wonder there's no fruit."*

Jesus said, **6"Whoever does not abide in me is thrown away like a branch and withers;**

So if there's no fruit, what's the problem?

If we treat people badly, what's the underlying reason for that?

Do we fear that if we are generous, there will not be enough for us?

Do we fear that if we are patient or kind, we will be taken advantage of?

Do we fear that if we are not self-centered, if we don't "look out for #1" (ourselves), that we won't be cared for?

All of those sorts of fears turn us in upon ourselves; as Luther said it: *incurvatus in se*; or, in the imagery of the vine: fears "shrivel us up."

### **Act 1, Scene 3. Final Diagnosis: Cut off**

*Vinegrower:* "Well, I guess there's nothing to do but cut this withered branch off..."

**Jesus said, "...my Father is the vinegrower. 2He removes every branch in me that bears no fruit. ...such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.**

Ultimately the problem with being turned in on ourselves, or shriveled up, is that it cuts us off -- not only from others, whom our fruits are meant to feed, but also from God.

After all, who is the Source of all those good things we fear we'll miss out on.

If we will insist on being withered branches, merely taking up space, it means that we are not receiving the life-giving sap and juice from the vine.

Dead branches have a way of infecting the vine; the vinedresser isn't going to stand for that! So, here comes the pruning hook. This is really bad news!

Cut off from the vine to make room for branches that will produce -- that sounds so final, so eternal.

**So, Act I, DEAD WOOD. We see a beautiful vine -- but it has a fruitless branch -- because it has lost its attachment to the vine -- and it is about to be cut off from the vine, eternally.**

## **BRANCHES OF THE TRUE VINE, ACT TWO: Living Branches**

### **Scene 1. Needed: An Eternal Solution to the Problem of Dead Wood**

*Enter The True Vine:*

***"3You have already been cleansed by the word that I have spoken to you.***

This sounds like a mixing of the metaphors, the picture language: "the branches" ***cleansed by the word,*** ? ? "The Word" doing the "cleaning." ? ?

A little strange, perhaps, but John the Evangelist is known to choose his words carefully and to load them with meaning.

For example, take Jn 1:14, "And the word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory...full of grace and truth.

What would happen if we paraphrased that verse this way: instead of, "...the word became flesh..." -- *the True Vine became a branch and bore fruit among us?*

Here's the point; Jesus is saying, "I am the True Vine," and we must see that word "true" as a huge sign with arrows and flashing lights pointing to Christ on the cross.

In the mystery of our redemption, the True Vine became a branch -- one of us!

And the fruit which he bore for us? -- full payment upon that cross for all sin.

He gives up his life so that his branches may be cleansed from sin by his word.

By rising to life again he gives us our eternal solution for all the dead wood in us.

### **Act 2, Scene 2. Now We Internalize What He Gives**

*Vinegrower:* "And for the sake of the true vine, the word who became a branch -- became one of you -- I will graft all of these other branches back onto the vine.

*Who knows, perhaps they will take what I give them through the vine to produce the fruit I want."*

**Jesus said, 4Abide in me as I abide in you. Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine, neither can you unless you abide in me.**

Standing there by that vineyard, the disciples must have understood their need to stay in touch with their Master.

Our Evangelist, John, thought to be the youngest disciple, was there that night, and he remembered those unusual words of the Savior. Now writing his Gospel as a mature Apostle he is emphasizing our Lord's desire to help us abide, to remain attached to him.

**4Abide in me as I abide in you, Jesus said.** In that blessed connection we find energy to revive our sorry, shriveled selves.

That connection is made here in this place where the branches of the True Vine gather Sunday for Sunday to be cleansed by his word, to receive his very life in the sacraments.

### **Act 2, Scene 3. Now Look! Fruitful**

*Vinegrower [sometime later]: "Look! A flower. And another one here. I think this might be working!"*

**Jesus said, 5I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing.**

When withered branches are grafted back into the vine and the sap begins to flow, it's only a matter of time before the fruit begins to appear.

They can't help it, those formerly-withered branches -- it just happens.

Think about the Christians in South Africa -- still a troubled country -- who cling by faith to our Lord Jesus and his promise to abide with them.

They can't help loving others as God has loved them.

A pastor in South Africa, Felix Meylahn, writes about following Jesus when things are falling apart:

Two of the teachers in our congregation were "redeployed" to teach in "township schools" ("townships" are very poor areas, often with no formal housing for the residents). They were asked to teach subjects they had not been trained to teach and they struggled for long periods without receiving their salaries from the Education Department. In addition, one was constantly under threat of violence, being harassed repeatedly by colleagues, because he was speaking up against the corrupt principal of the school. How are they to co-operate with God's caring [left] hand in such circumstances?

How indeed, unless they abide in the True Vine.

Again:

I know of no family in my congregation/community, white or black, in which there has not been a case of serious crime perpetrated against them with impunity by criminals who get away with it more than 50% of the time, because the justice system is so corrupt. So they leave, and those that remain either can't leave (for financial reasons) or are tenaciously holding on to the idea that they do have a responsibility, a calling (vocation, "Berufung") to be in South Africa, and to do their share of the work of "care and redemption" in this part of the world.

Fruitful Christians in hard circumstances -- an inspiration to us all, I hope.

So our drama has ended, or has it? Dead wood is now a living branch in the vine.

**Act Two shows that we are grafted into the vine, and now we internalize by faith our Lord's own power by abiding in his word and sacraments; thus we are now fruitful in him.**

Therefore this drama really continues every time we walk out that door.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

S.D.g.

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