

On January 28, 1872, 150 years ago this past Friday, a group of German Lutheran immigrants (via Indiana mainly) who had moved to Platte County near Farley, formalized what had already been occurring in their homes for some time: The blessed Gospel of Christ that had been proclaimed in their house churches, and even in the public-school building when they outgrew their homes would now be proclaimed from a new Lutheran parish/congregation as they signed the constitution of Sankt Johannis Evangelisch-Lutherische Kirche/Gemeinde Die Unveranderte Augsburgische Konfession, or St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church/Parish of the UAC. (Nicely abbreviated to St. John's Lutheran Church).

As I mentioned in this month's article, it was very fitting with so many founding members knowing something about agriculture they understood the need for nurturing their faith in Christ and their need to establish a congregation and call a pastor. They understood the critical importance of being where Christ had promised to be found - where His Word was proclaimed and sacraments offered. They understood the importance of abiding in Christ.

In our anniversary theme verse of John 15:5 our Lord tells us: **I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.** Branches are only living if they are connected to a living tree or vine. Separated from that source of life, the branch is dead and barren.

Our Lord and creator is THE source of Life, (the Tree of Life) the only true source of life, not only physical life (that all things were created through Him and sustained by Him) but especially spiritual, eternal life. The very meaning of our existence is to be connected to/in relationship with the Lord our creator/the Vine. To be separated from that vine/from the Lord of Life is death - physical, spiritual, and eternal.

And tragically, that is exactly the condition each of us was born into this fallen world - dead. When our first parents fell into sin, they cut themselves off from their creator and source of Life and infected all of creation, including each of us their descendants with the deadly disease of sin. It poured through the garden and left all of us as lifeless, dead, dry branches. Oh, we can look alive enough, but just think of the miserable, searching, barren, empty lives of the people of this world, seeking in vain to find meaning, purpose, happiness, to have the fruitfulness of Life, to fill that God-shaped hole in their heart that nothing in this world can do.

A branch separated from the vine is lifeless--it cannot live on its own, it is dead and empty, and in this picture is suitable only for firewood. The picture is clear: fallen mankind is now suitable only for the fires of hell which was created for the devil and the rest of the fallen angels and is now tragically reserved for all the lifeless branches of creation--those who continue to reject their Living Creator and only source of life.

Yet when the Father/the vine dresser of the Garden saw His infected/dying garden, and wanted to have a new living vineyard, He "planted" the best new vine possible to give Life to His vineyard--one not infected by the disease of sin and death. He planted/buried His Son in the ground to give life again to His creation. Jesus's suffering and dying in our place, giving His own life paid the price we owed for our sinful guilt. But more so, we rejoice in knowing that the Vine of Life also burst forth from the grave - the true Tree of Life Jesus Christ has burst forth from the grave in victory over sin and death and gives forth True Life from Himself. He is the Vine of Life that alone gives life back to the lifeless, the One we must be connected to in order to live.

It was in the blessed sacrament of your baptism that God the Holy Spirit gave you His grace, you a dead, lifeless branch and grafted you into the living vine of Christ. He created the faith in your heart to trust in that saving work of Jesus. In that water and word, God the Holy Spirit crucified you with Christ. You were connected to His death and payment in your place, His life and righteousness covering your nakedness, shame and guilt. You were also connected/grafted into His resurrection! Grafted into the vine of Christ, you had His life and love flowing into you, flooding you with true life. You were (remade in His image) lovingly made into a living branch, once again bearing fruit of life - enabled to love those around you as you have first been loved by Christ.

I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing. We must remain abiding in Christ, have His life flowing into us and through us. Apart from Him, relying on our own wisdom and strength we can do nothing. (Indeed, if we wander away from His Word, cut ourselves off from Him, we can shrivel up and die eternally.) How do we then abide in Him, remain in Him?

We most certainly need to daily recall our baptism, that is to daily rely on the grace that He gave us in that sacrament to drown and bury our Old Adam, to have God help us to kill it's influence and power over us, and instead have the New Person in Christ raise up and live and love as we have been reborn to do.

This daily remembrance of baptism, living in baptismal grace is really then remaining grafted to the Vine Jesus Christ. It is abiding in Him. Spending time with Him, being in His Word. It is totally relying upon His mercy, forgiveness, love and life, His love flowing through you and bearing the fruit of Life - of once again being able to live and love as a child of God is created to do.

Abide in Jesus, spend time with Him, continue being where He has promised to be with us, in His Means of Grace, His Word and sacraments.

That was why those Lutheran families in Platte County formed this parish, and why they established a school as well! From its beginning and up to 1940 St. John's had a parochial day school, seeing to the Christian education of their children, that they would be fed even more upon the grace of God in Christ.

And that desire to support faithful Lutheran education and helping kids to abide in Christ continued when St. John's joined a group of fellow Kansas City North Circuit congregations in the formation of the Northland Lutheran School Association, and in particular, Martin Luther Academy. What a joy it has been watching as God has worked through the staff and teachers of MLA in helping their students grow in the grace and knowledge of their Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. What a blessing this morning for us to be able to enjoy a bit of the fruits of that with the students' gift of music and verse for us. And we know that as MLA remains faithful in abiding in Christ, seeing to the faithful instruction in God's Word, that He will continue to produce the fruits of new life in and through them.

Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit.

For 150 years, through good times and difficult times, God has graciously given life to the lifeless here at St. John's. He has seen to it that His children, His branches abide in Him through His Means of Grace and abiding in Him He has produced and keeps producing the His good fruit in this Gemeinde (parish), for apart from Him we can do nothing, indeed, we perish. Today, we rejoice that by God's grace, we are 150 years abiding in Christ!

Amen