

Sermon for April 27, 2013 – Easter 5

John 15:1-8

Theme: Am I a healthy branch of the vine?

- 1) *The Diagnosis.*
- 2) *The Prognosis.*
- 3) *The Treatment.*

"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.

Let me start of my sermon with a question for you to think about: Would you describe your relationship with your Savior as healthy or unhealthy?

Now before you settle on an answer to that question, there are a few myths about Christianity I would first like to debunk.

Myth number 1: "As long as I pray, I have a healthy relationship with God." This is false. It is true that Christians pray, but prayer does not make you a Christian. Muslims pray. Hindus pray. Atheists have even been caught praying. Now don't get me wrong: Prayer is important. Proper prayer is a fruit of faith. But prayer, without true faith, actually annoys God more than not praying at all. If your act of praying is the only thing you look to as evidence of your faith, then you have a serious problem.

Myth number 2: "As long as I have a membership in a Church, and appear on occasion, I have a healthy relationship with Jesus." Again, this is false. Your "membership" to a Church does not save you. Just because you say you are a Christian does not mean you are one. Jesus once said: *"Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers (Matthew 7:21-23)!"*

Myth number 3: "Once I become a Christian and come to Church regularly, it is impossible for me to fall from faith." Again, this is false. Remember Judas Iscariot? He was a hand-picked disciple of Jesus. He was with Jesus, saw his miracles and listened to him teach every day. But what happened? Greed! Slowly, his heart began to drift away from Jesus, even though he was constantly Christ's presence. Then it happened: His heart had drifted so far that decided to betray Jesus. No one who saw him would have guessed it, but Judas was spiritually dead!

Scary isn't it? The things many people in the world point to as evidence of a healthy faith are really no evidence at all. And this is why Jesus had our sermon text recorded for us: to help us properly assess our spiritual health. And so let us all ask ourselves the question: **am I a healthy branch of the vine?** Let's look at great Physician's 1) diagnosis, 2) prognosis and 3) the treatment he prescribes.

The Diagnosis

Jesus uses an illustration to help us diagnose our spiritual condition. He says: *"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.*

Our spiritual relationship with Jesus is very much like the relationship between a grapevine and its branches. If you see a branch that is healthy and green, with a lot of fruit on it, you know that this branch has a good connection with the vine. It is very much alive.

In the same way, the Christian who is connected with Christ - the Christian who looks to Jesus in faith for forgiveness and salvation - is very much alive; and this spiritual life will show itself in the fruit he produces. The Christian's vibrancy and life flows completely and utterly from Christ. How? Through the Gospel which the Christian receives in faith.

But if the Christian does not receive the Gospel in faith, then he will be like a branch that has no sap in it. Such a branch produces no fruit. Such a branch withers, dies and becomes kindling for the fire.

Now, in order to access our spiritual health, we need to ask ourselves: what is the fruit a Christian produces? Think of it this way: if apple trees produce apples, raspberry bushes produce raspberries, and grape vines produce grapes. . . then what fruit will a Christian produce? When people look at a Christian, they should be able to see Christ.

So let me ask you: when people see you, do they see Christ? Do they hear words of encouragement, patience and love come from your lips, or cursing, filthy talk and lying? When people get on your nerves, do they see someone who deals with them patiently? Do they see someone who is willing to forgive? Do people see someone who makes God's Word his top priority, someone who puts his heavenly Father's will above all else? When people look at you, do they see Jesus and his love and forgiveness?

If we are all honest with ourselves, people don't see this in us all the time, do they? Instead of an abundance of fruit, often times people see only one or two grapes on us. So where does that leave us? Well, is a branch that produces only one leaf dead? No. It may be in danger of dying, but it is still alive. The same is true with the Christian. Even if he has just one fruit, he is still alive and connected to the vine. If he weren't, he would have no fruit.

So if you see Christ in a Christian's life, what does that tell you about him? It tells you that he has a healthy relationship with Christ. If you cannot see Christ in the Christian's life at all, what does that tell you? That his relationship with Christ has been severed. If you see only a little fruit in a Christian's life, what does that tell you? That he is alive in Christ, but needs to be tended to in order to grow more fruitful.

Prognosis

Let me ask all the gardeners in the congregation a question: imagine you planted a tomato? Would you be satisfied with your tomato plant if it grew only a little, looked sickly, and produced only one tomato? I don't imagine that you would be. I can imagine that many of you would try to prune, fertilize, water and do everything you could to encourage its growth. And if it produced more fruit, you would be happy. Why? Because this plant glorified your gardening talents.

The same is true for God. He is the gardener, and we are the vine branches he tends to. He wants us to grow strong, healthy and produce fruit. This is our purpose in life and for this reason He saved us, that we may bring glory to his name. St. Paul once said: *we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do (Ephesians 2:10).*

So, what happens to the Christian who produces absolutely no fruit? He is taken away and burned in the eternal fires prepared for the devil and his angels. Why? Is it because he didn't produce fruit? No, but because he was spiritually dead. His lack of fruit is the evidence of his severed relationship with Christ; not its cause. He separated himself from the Gospel – from the soul nourishing sap, which alone keeps us alive in Christ.

But what about the Christian who only bears a little fruit? He is alive and is still receiving nourishment from Christ. But he is not well. He is in danger of allowing himself to be cut off from Jesus. So what does God do with such a Christian? Our text tells us: *every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful.* God lovingly prunes him with his law - cutting away at the sin that is trying to kill him. He nourishes that sickly branch with the Gospel, prompting the sap of the Spirit to flow freely to the Christian so that He may be rejuvenated for fruitful living. The Holy Spirit comes to us through the Word and Sacrament. As we use these means of grace, our sins are forgiven, our faith is strengthened, and we grow spiritually stronger - producing fruit in keeping with our repentance.

The Treatment

So, which branch are you: the healthy, sick, or dead one? If you are worried about being the dead branch, I can say with confidence that this is not who you are. How-so? Well, have you ever seen a dead person worry? They can't. Why not? Because they are already dead! So if you are worried about your relationship with Jesus, you may resemble the sick branch, but you are still very much alive. All you need is treatment from our great Physician - treatment he is more than happy to offer.

If you want to be a more fruitful Christian you must first of all recognize that your life comes completely from Jesus alone. It is his work alone keeps us spiritually alive. Therefore, stay connected to Christ. Come to church to hear the Word. Study it at home. Remember your baptism and how God adopted you to be his dearly loved child. Come to Communion to receive the forgiveness of sin. Christ promises to come to us in his Word and Sacraments, therefore make use of them. Then you will be pruned and fertilized; fed and watered. You will grow spiritually, produce fruit, and show yourself to be a true disciple of Jesus.

Finally it must be said that no matter how faithful we are to God - no matter how fruitful our lives - there is ALWAYS room for improvement. So remain in Christ. Make use of the Word and Sacraments, and keep your focus on God 's love for you in Christ Jesus our Lord. He has paid for your sins in full. He has purchased and won you for God. As you focus on Christ's love for you, your love for him will grow and produce fruit. You will remain in Christ, and Christ will remain in you. Amen.