

Maundy Thursday  
**The Garden of Good Works**  
Text: John 15:1-5

The last six Wednesday evenings we used the Bible's imagery of gardens for an overview of the story of our salvation in Christ. Tonight let us continue that theme to describe what a Christian with a living faith produces. We might call it the Garden of Good Works.

*"I am the vine; you are the branches."* Those are the beautiful words that our Savior so tenderly spoke to his disciples on that last night they were together before he died on a cross. He knew soon they wouldn't be able to see him with their eyes or touch him with their hands anymore. Wouldn't they be helpless without him? Most certainly and so would we! But Jesus says: *"I am the vine, you are the branches."* The disciples could understand this picture all right. The hillsides of Palestine were covered with vineyards. In Jesus' day raising grapes was a common way to earn a living. When anyone looks at a grapevine, you don't make a distinction between the grapevines and the grape branches. They are one and the same. When Jesus says to you: *"I am the vine, you are the branches,"* he's saying: Christ and Christians can never be two separate things. You and I are one and the same with Jesus. How good it is to know that.

You know, farmers today perhaps more than ever know the value of good stock. By crossbreeding, cross-fertilization, budding and grafting, farmers know that the offspring is rarely any better than the parent. As the vine is so are the branches. Christ says to us today: *"I am the true vine."* Let's look at his pedigree. Jesus is begotten of the Father from eternity. You can't improve on that pedigree. Yes, he is a good Vine. Look at his nature. Scriptures say: *"He is holy... separate from sinners... undefiled."* Yes, he is a good Vine. Look at his power. The Bible says: *"All things were made by him; and without him nothing was made that has been made."* Yes, he is a good Vine. Look at his present condition. Yes, they crucified Jesus. They buried him. But three days later, Jesus rose again. And he's still alive, ascended into heaven, ruling over all things and taking care of us every day. Yes, he is a good Vine! Yet the goodness of this grapevine doesn't end there. For 33 years, God the Father planted this Vine, not in a beautiful garden, but in a rotten world filled with rotten people. Did you know that you and I are some of those rotten people? Sinners we are, sinners whose branches produce tons of rotten fruit filled with ugly worms. But instead of throwing those wretched branches into an eternal fire, this Father wraps his Son, the good Vine, around an ugly cross where he lays all of our rottenness upon him and punishes him instead of us. Then his Holy Spirit grafts us to this Grapevine by faith. Yes, Jesus Christ is a good Vine. Because of him, all my sins have been forgiven. Because of him someday when I die I will go to heaven.

Chief of sinners though I be Jesus shed his blood for me,  
Died that I might live on high Lived that I might never die,  
As the branch is to the vine, I am his and he is mine. (CW 385:1)

Those aren't just some words that are kind of nice to sing in church every now and then. Those words describe so correctly what a wonderful thing it is to be a Christian. We have been forever joined together to our Savior Jesus. *"Whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's."*

Jesus says, *“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit”* (verse 5). It was not mere coincidence that Jesus used the picture of a grapevine to teach about good works on the same night that he used grape wine to institute the Lord’s Supper. Our ability to produce good works comes from him. And he gives himself to us in the Lord’s Supper.

Good works do not save us. Good works do not even make a Christian. If, as a pastor, I told you to do something and you went out and did it, you would not for that reason be a Christian. There are many unbelievers who seemingly do far more and better things than many Christians.

Rather, a true good work is a grateful response to the fact that we are already saved. Such a response is only possible if I believe that I am in fact saved by Jesus’ death and resurrection. In other words, true good works that please God spring from faith in Jesus for salvation. The Bible says, *“Everything that does not come from faith is sin”* (Romans 14:23). In another place it says, *“Without faith it is impossible to please God”* (Hebrews 11:6). We can call a good work a fruit of faith, something that faith produces. Jesus said, *“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”* (4).

*“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.”* Do you see what Jesus Christ is offering you in those beautiful words? Just like the sap from the vine flows into its branches making it alive and fruitful, so Christ’s life, Christ’s strength, Christ’s will, and Christ’s desires can flow into you and me. No matter who you are, little boys or little girls, young men or young ladies, Dads or Moms, Grandpas or Grandmas, Jesus Christ is an unlimited power source for you, not just to drag yourself from one day to the next, but an unlimited power source to live joyfully and meaningfully a Christian life devoted to him. Does that sound like a good offer to you? Jesus Christ wants nothing more than to take over my life and yours and be the dynamic force in it.

God wants our fruits of faith, our Christian living, to increase continually. The alternative is to be cut off from Christ. For God will not tolerate anything that is not a good work. Jesus said, *“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”* (1,2).

Now comes the little part of this text about the Gardener. Every grape farmer who wants to have a beautiful vineyard knows that he has to do more than just plant the vines. He also has a vinedresser to work on his grapes. This vinedresser has two tools—a pair of shears and a large pruning knife. He goes down the rows, cuts out all the dead branches, and burns them up. But then he goes back down those rows and with his pruning knife; he cuts away at the living branches. It might disturb someone to watch him do this pruning because the vines and branches look pretty bare when he’s done, but this vinedresser knows what he’s doing. You see, next year those pruned branches produce much larger and sweeter grapes than ever before.

*“Remain in me and I will remain in you... If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.”* Please carry that blessed truth with you today. There is no limit to what we can become for Christ. *“Remain in me and I will remain in you.”* As we continue in the study of God’s Word and in regular reception of the Sacrament of the Altar, we never stop growing in Christ. When growing as branches, we have the

awesome power of Christ's resurrection victory pulsating through our veins. Just as plants thrive on chlorophyll, we thrive on the resurrection victory and power of Christ. How wonderful it is to be a Christian who can say in every circumstance: *"I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."*

Jesus says: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener."* Isn't that wonderful? Our heavenly Father knows what he's doing to his vineyard. He finally does cut down all the dead branches and burn them in eternal hell fire. But there's something else for us here beside that. Like the vinedresser I was just talking about, our Father also prunes our lives of whatever might keep us from producing more fruit. When the Father prunes our lives, it hurts. We feel pain. We go through trial and suffering. We may even rebel or become angry with him as he cuts and trims things out of our lives, but the Father knows what he's doing. Every pruning has his gracious purpose behind it—always to bring forth not only more fruit, but fruit more beautiful than before. When we ourselves are brought to tears and pain, we can become more kind and understanding to others. When we ourselves learn that only God can help, we grow in trust and dependence. The Christian family that goes through a troubled time of crisis becomes a stronger family. The good father and good mother become even better parents when one of their children almost dies. The Christian patient under severe trial becomes a powerful example to others. Yes, step-by-step, the Lord God prunes us so that more and more we become like his Son, the true Vine.

But how can we grow if we don't have it in us to grow like this? If we feel only our weaknesses, our wrong desires, our disinterest in serving the Lord? Jesus answers that question when he says, *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you"* (3). In other words, he forgives us our sins. By forgiving us, God counts it as though he has pruned all sin from you and me completely. He has declared us holy in Christ. His forgiveness is our sap. It's the nectar that we need to stay alive spiritually and to grow in good works.

You see, the more we realize the extent of our own sin, the more we realize what Jesus Christ did for us. The better we fathom how low we are capable of going, the higher we are lifted by his amazing mercy. The more appalled we are at our own potential for ugliness, the more intensely we'll love him who rescued us in spite of it. The more we cringe at how driven our unholy nature is to self-satisfaction, the more we can only gaze with adoring fascination at him who devoted every waking moment, every ounce of energy to save our lives and not his own.

What other response is there but to love such a Lord? And loving him, we don't ever want to do wrong by him ever again. He has won our hearts, our gratitude, our loyalty! Our desire to sin starts to die off. Our desire to serve him comes to life. Whatever he wants—somehow we want to please him. In fact, God the Holy Spirit personally uses Christ's forgiveness to equip us for that very purpose in living.

And now Christ our true Vine feeds us and fills us with his own holiness, forgiveness, and love even more in the Lord's Supper. In this sacrament we receive his body and blood and fill ourselves up on Christ himself. Everything he obtained by keeping the Ten Commandments; by suffering, dying, and being buried; by descending into hell; by rising from the dead; by ascending into heaven; and by being seated at God's right hand he gives to us along with himself and makes it ours in this sacrament.

Through faith in his words, *“This is my body; this is my blood,”* we are truly supplied and taken care of. Now we are enabled to offer ourselves to one another as he has offered himself to us. Christ’s command to believers is this: *“Love each other as I have loved you”* (John 15:12). This is how we serve Christ in the Garden of Good Works. Amen.