

Fifth Sunday of Easter – May 3, 2015

John 15:1-8

¹ “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.

For the high school seniors that are here this morning, I don’t need to tell them that their lives will soon be changing. They will soon leave behind their high schools where they have spent the last four years. If they are heading away to school, they will leave behind family and friends, even their bedroom at home. If they are going into the workforce they may have a new job or expanded hours at a current job. They may be staying at home for now, but this also will not last forever (or so their parents hope). As things change, there will be moments when they feel cut off. It is not permanent—they will see family and friends again, come home on breaks. But as they continue on this path they will eventually be cut off from the life they knew as a teenager, as new friends and places and eventually family become a permanent part of their lives.

But through it all there is one thing that does not change and we see that in our gospel lesson for this morning. This is isn’t just for high school seniors, but for believers of all ages. As we study the vine and branches we will focus on Jesus’ repeated encouragement: **“Remain in Me.”** First, **that we may receive strength** and second, **that we may produce fruit.**

John 15 takes us back once again to the upper room on that first Maundy Thursday evening and the time Jesus spent teaching and encouraging his disciples. They had spent the last three years following Jesus, traveling with him and learning from him. But with his mission on earth soon coming to a completion, those circumstances would have to change. But that didn’t mean their close relationship would have to change. So Jesus gave them another one of his “I am” statements as encouragement for what they would face over the next days and weeks and years.

Verse 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.” Jesus turned to world of grapes for an illustration that is simple and straightforward: grape vines sprout branches that produce fruit. A branch that is cut off or separated from the vine cannot produce fruit on its own because it needs the nutrients that come from the vine. As verse 6 mentions, a branch that is cut off withers and can only be thrown away, nothing more than fuel for a fire.

Jesus was the vine, his disciples were the branches. If they were going to produce fruit and carry out the tasks assigned to them, they would need to remain in him. It would no longer be the physical contact with Jesus as they had enjoyed for the last three years. Rather verse 7: “If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.” Their “nutrients” would come from his words. The words he would be sharing that night.

The words that came from the Old Testament. The words that would still be coming in the New Testament. As they remained in his word, they would find strength to produce fruit in their lives.

You and I are also branches connected to the vine. So how healthy are our branches? How strong is the connection? Do Jesus' words remain in us as our daily source of strength? Or is the Bible something we studied back in confirmation or instruction classes and that was it? Is our time with God's Word limited to the time we spend together on a Sunday morning? If this is the case perhaps we are trying to substitute with other sources of nutrients and strength. Perhaps it's the education we received, whether in school or the experience of life, our human knowledge is our strength. Perhaps it's our personal identity, the job we have or the family we have that is our focus and from where we draw strength. Perhaps it's our free time, our entertainment, as we live for that escape from our daily life. There can be all kinds of substitutes for strength, but all will fail in the end. If as a branch we have weakened ourselves with substitute nutrients or not enough of the true nutrients, we risk being broken off. One strong wind, one attack of the devil, one crisis in our life and our branch could be snapped. Then a broken branch withers, only to be thrown away and burned in the eternal fires of hell.

The good news is that Jesus is the vine and we are the branches. It is not up to our own strength to support ourselves. Our strength comes from him as his words remain in us. For the times that we look elsewhere for strength, there is the forgiveness that Jesus won for us. And so we need those daily nutrients. Whether it's a devotion found in a book or an e-mail, or bible chapters that we read, or a simple verse for the day to meditate on, God's word gives us strength. We need constant reminders of his mercy and love as we face the sinful things of this life that threaten to break our branches. And we have his promise in verse 7: "Ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you." This is not a blank check for any earthly desire. But as his words remain in us, we learn to ask for things according to his will, knowing that he will answer our prayers as he knows is best for us, to keep us as strong branches on the vine, as we remain in him.

Being a branch on the vine is about more than just being strong and healthy. In these eight verses there are seven references to fruit. A vine has branches to produce fruit. That is the natural order of things and the purpose of the vine. In verse 8 Jesus mentioned what this fruit would be: "This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples." The disciples were to show that they followed Jesus. The books of Acts is filled with examples of the disciples doing that through their preaching and facing persecution. John summarized this fruit in his first letter: "And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us" (1 Jn 3:23). Bearing fruit was about showing love, love to God and love to one's neighbor. Countless applications would flow from their showing this love in their lives.

Jesus also made clear some consequences in this process. Verses 1 & 2: "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." Not producing fruit was not an option, such a branch was useless and would be cut off by the gardener and thrown away. Pruning was another part of this process for the gardener. Pruning is trimming and cutting back the branch, whether old growth or new growth, all for the health of the branch and enable it to produce even better fruit. This pruning process would at times be painful for the disciples. But such suffering would help them to focus their fruit production as the Lord watched over their lives.

So when might we be in need of pruning? Perhaps we are letting our lives get so busy with so many different opportunities for producing fruit—at home, at work, at school, at church, with family, with friends, with neighbors, that our new growth is stretched too thin and we find that we're not able to produce good fruit in any of those areas. Perhaps we have old growth that needs trimming as we've become too wrapped up in the things of this world and so the Lord must remove some of our earthly comforts—health, finances, companionship—to enable us to start producing healthy fruit again.

The good news is that as we are pruned, as our fruit production is refocused, it's not about us or our ability. It is still his words remaining in us that give us strength. It is still our connection to the vine that allows us to produce fruit. Our showing love to others flows from the love that Jesus has shown us. He sacrificed himself for the sins of the world so that someday we might join him in heaven. So we produce fruit and demonstrate that love, sacrificing ourselves for others, all so that they too might be branches connected to the vine and join us someday in heaven. As Jesus described it later in this chapter, he has appointed us to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last forever (Jn 15:16).

For the high school seniors this morning, their lives will soon be changing. They will not always remain in high school. They will not always remain in their childhood bedroom. They will not always remain in their current family situation. But no matter what changes come for them or for us, let us remain in Jesus. He is the vine and we are the branches. As his Word remains in us it will give us strength to remain connected to him. As we remain connected we will produce fruit showing ourselves to be his disciples. As branches of the vine, his promise to us is simple. “Remain in me, and I will remain in you” (v. 4). Amen.