



Easter 4 – April 27-28-29, 2024

Preacher: Pastor Scott Oelhafen

Sermon Theme: Remain in Jesus – the True Vine

1. Planted in Him 2. Pruned by Him 3. Productive for Him

(Jesus said): "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.

Dear fellow branches of the True Vine, Jesus,

Books tell stories. Movies tell stories. But, if you lived in the Middle Ages, a time historians mark about 500-700 years ago, of course, there was no Netflix, no internet. And books were only read by the cultural elite. Most people couldn't read or gain access to books. So let's say *St. Paul's* was located in Germany back in the Middle Ages. How would we teach most people about the Gospel and the Bible? We'd use things like stained glass windows. Most people think that churches have stained glass windows only because they look decorative. In reality, stained glass windows tell stories. In church, stained glass windows tell true stories of God's creation, of the apostles, and most importantly of Christ's death and resurrection. Take a few moments after worship today and marvel at the many stained glass windows we have in the sanctuary.

But, we use other media to communicate Biblical concepts, don't we? We use Christian art and music! But, I'd like to direct your attention to a special image Jesus compares himself to in our sermon reading. Jesus used the picture language of a massive grape vine with all sizes of branches growing from it. This might seem like a strange picture to us living in New Ulm with few vineyards. Yet, Jesus is the ultimate "Man of the People." He knew what picture would connect with people familiar with the soil. So Jesus, the consummate communicator, used language of the Bible that they would easily understand. He pictures Himself as the main vine and His followers, that's u , as His branches. Eight times, in eight short verses, Jesus tells us to "**remain in Him.**" Jesus wasn't being redundant, repeating Himself, or saying the same thing over and over again because He was careless. He was making a point. That's why John, the writer of today's reading in chapter 15 of his Gospel urges us to **Remain In Jesus**

Christ – the True Vine. We learn three things from Jesus' words today. We are to remain planted in Him, remain pruned by Him, and remain productive for Him..

Jesus opens our Bible reading by declaring: ***I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener.*** With these words, Jesus singles Himself & His Word out as the only source of what's true, authoritative, and what's most important. And He identifies the Heavenly Father as the gardener. He's the one who provides for His vine & branches. In our reading, Jesus tells us: ***Remain in me and I will remain in you.*** So as His branches, we remain planted in Jesus. We were planted in Jesus the moment we were baptized. The moment the waters of Baptism washed our sins away in Jesus blood, the Holy Spirit grafted us into this true vine, named Jesus. But, notice something important. Jesus tells us to remain planted or remain connected to Him. Why would He have to say something like that? It's simple: Out of love for our souls, He's warning us. He warns us that it's a jungle out there, a spiritually dangerous jungle. There are many other vines that we branches like to attach ourselves to. For example, it's easy to become attached to the things of this world. We can so easily think that cash and popularity can make us happy. Only we find out later that these things are only temporary and don't satisfy us for very long. Then, again it's easy to become attached to ourselves, innocently filling up our personal schedules with school, work, living for the weekend, with friends, shopping, screen time, house projects, the list goes on and on. Our schedules get so filled up that Jesus & His Word that provides the spiritual nourishment of worship and His Word gets pushed way down our priority lists. What a tangled mess we get ourselves into.

We need this warning to remain planted in Jesus now more than ever. Next weekend 32 of St. Paul's teens will make their confirmation promises to the LORD. What a privilege to see them stand in front of God's altar to join us as communing members and take the LORD's Body and Blood for spiritual nourishment & strength. And yet, what will happen to them the week after Confirmation? What happens to our worship attendance this Spring or during the summer? Will we be faithful or will we become detached? Will we be just as excited to receive Holy Communion like these young people or will it become more of a "going through the motions?" Time will tell! Because of my failures and your imperfections, each one of us needs to hear Jesus saying in our reading: ***You are already clean because of the Word I have spoken to You.*** Yes, we are clean, forgiven because our sins have already been paid for by Jesus. He paid the penalty for every time we missed an opportunity to hear God's Word, for every time our bodies were in church but our minds were a million miles away. Jesus suffered hell and died for our sins. And he rose from the grave to show us God accepted that payment for sin. Now all of us need the assurance of His forgiveness over and over. The inspired writer St. Paul put it this way: ***Jesus saved us not because of righteous things we had done, but because of His mercy. He saved us through the washing of rebirth and the renewal of the Holy Spirit (Titus 3:5).*** So get entwined with Jesus, the life-giving vine. And stay attached for a lifetime of growth in God's Word.

Jesus continues to use the picture language of plants in our reading. In order to **Remain in Jesus the True Vine**, we need to remain pruned by Him. Our reading continues: ***(God) 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.*** Picture God as a gardener who cares so much for His branches that He wants them to produce as much fruit as possible. So what does He do? He prunes the branches. God trims us in much the same way through personal trials and troubles. Martin Luther, the founder of the Lutheran church once said: *If the vine could talk and saw (the gardener) coming along ... cutting the wood from its branches with His clipper, what do you think (the vine) would say? 'What are you doing? ... You are chopping my branches with those iron teeth. You are tearing and pinching me everywhere ...* Pruning involves cutting and sometimes, that cutting hurts. Have you ever felt like God was against you? Have you ever asked: "How much cutting are you going to do in my life God? Why do you allow troubles to overwhelm me, death to surround me, and the devil to taunt me?" It's especially then, we need to remember the words of St. Paul: ***If God is for us, who can be against us? (Romans 8:31).*** Because of Jesus, as His believers, God always is for us. He's on our side. He's the one who loves us, knows exactly where we need pruning, and how much pruning we need. He uses our problems and even death & the devil as His tools for His trimming. If our hearts are heavy because of problems with family or friends or if our minds are pre-occupied with health or finances, God is pruning us. He's focusing our attention to remain in Jesus the true vine. So, remain in Him as the only source of forgiveness and strength.

In Hampton Court, near London, England, there's a giant grapevine under glass. Experts say that it's 1000 years old. It has just one vine that is more than two feet thick. Some of the branches are 200 feet long. Because of the skillful cutting and pruning, this vine produces several tons of grapes each year. Even though some of the smaller branches are 200 feet from the main vine, they still bear much fruit because they are still joined to the vine and the life of the vine flows through them. In the same way, God wants us to remain in Jesus the True Vine to be productive for Him.

Jesus says: ***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.*** Look at it this way: what fruit do you expect an apple tree to produce? Well, apples. What fruit do you expect an orange tree to produce? This isn't rocket science: oranges. Well, you and I aren't trees, but what fruit do you expect Christians to produce? Christian fruit like Christian attitudes and actions, right? Well, St. Paul gives us a grocery list of that Christian fruit that we can produce, as he skillfully describes it in Galatians 5:22 ***the fruit of the Holy Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.*** Do you ever find yourself needing any of those? As we remain connected to the True Vine Jesus, through His Gospel, the Holy Spirit changes our attitudes and actions from selfishly serving ourselves to gratefully serving Him. Grateful people tend to be happier people. That means when we give thanks to God, we'll be more productive wherever he places us: whether as a student, worker, homemaker or retiree. And isn't that why Jesus put us here on this planet in the first place. In our reading, He says: ***If you remain in me and***

my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. My friends, you'll never get a better offer anywhere else. Keep this picture of Jesus front and center as the True Vine, and Remain in Him.

In the middle of the Arizona desert, it's not hard to spot irrigated fields. When nature is allowed to take its course, there's almost nothing that grows. But, where the land is irrigated and watered, the warm climate produces lush growth. If you've ever flown into the Phoenix, Arizona area, the contrast between the barren desert and green fields is remarkable. Those green fields really stand out. That's exactly the way God intends Christian branches like us to stand out. In the middle of our spiritually barren world, God plants us as His living, growing, fruit producing children, connected to Jesus, our True vine. Our reading plainly tells us: God wants us His branches to grow, grow spiritually. That only happens when we **Remain in Jesus Christ – the True Vine:** remain planted, pruned and productive. So join us here at St. Paul's, to remain connected to Jesus. **Amen.**