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Sermon

May 2, 2021, The Fourth Sunday after Easter

To Him who loved us and washed us from our sins in His own blood, and has made us kings and priests to His God and Father, to Him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. (Rev 1:5-6 NKJ)

Our sermon text for this Sunday is taken from Saint John, The 15th Chapter, the first 8 verses:

“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit. ³ “You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. ⁵ “I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. ⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, 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 done for you. ⁸ My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.

This is the Word of the LORD!!!

Mercy, Grace, and peace are yours through your God and Father, and through His Son, Jesus Christ, true God and Man, dear fellow Sons and Daughters of the King...

April showers bring May flowers. As we find ourselves here in the month of May, we are undeniably well into Spring. Even in some Northern parts of our country, by the time May rolls around, it's pretty great weather all around.

Spring is the season of new life. Just look outside, everything is budding or blooming. The thing that you discover in spring is all the new growth. Sometimes there is wild growth that needs to be cut back. Sometimes, there is lack of growth, which is evident and disappointing. Maybe that turf you planted in Fall has failed to blossom like you were expecting. Maybe weeds are choking out the growth you wanted. Spring is the season for new life, but it's also the season for pulling weeds.

Where are we at in our growth? Are we budding and growing as we should? Are we lacking growth? Are we growing wild? Do we need cutting away? These are important questions to ask yourself. Honest answers can be hard to swallow.

In our text this morning, we see where true growth and life comes from. It comes from the Vine. The true

Vine is Jesus Christ, the Lord of life. He is our lifeline because it is only through Him that we truly have life. We need to be cut away in a way that keeps that Vine open. If we are in the vine, fruits will be produced. The key to all of this is our connection to Him. If we don't have that connection, we will die. But if we do, then we will live, and we will bloom! We pray: LORD, SANCTIFY US BY YOUR TRUTH, YOUR WORD IS TRUTH, AMEN!

The context of these words of Jesus might get forgotten. These words are iconic. One could easily forget that Jesus spoke these things as He and His disciples made their way from the upper room towards the garden of Gethsemane.

As they approached the garden, Jesus had something to say: **“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.**

There was so much that happened during that week. Another event of holy week that often gets overlooked, but perhaps provides background here, is an encounter Jesus had with a certain fig tree while He was going to the temple. **Now the next day, when they had come out from Bethany, He was hungry. 13 And seeing from afar a fig tree having leaves, He went to see if perhaps He would find something on it. When He came to it, He found nothing but leaves, for it was not the season for figs. 14 In response Jesus said to it, "Let no one eat fruit from you ever again." (Mar 11:12-14 NKJ)**

This seems like a strange statement to make. Why would Jesus curse a tree? Well, Jesus was hungry. He thought He might get some food on the road. He saw leaves, so you would think there would be fruit. But no fruit was found **for it was not the season for figs**. After all, if you have apple trees like we do here in our parsonage lawn, you wouldn't expect apples in May. September or October, but not May. But this cursing was not done out of human anger or hunger. It was done for the disciples.

Most miracles have to do with restoration. Jesus restored sight to the blind, health to the leper, life to the dead. But the Word is sharper than any two-edged sword. It has the power to heal, but it also has the power to cut. And that power is wielded here. On the return trip to Bethany, the disciples noticed the once healthy albeit fruitless tree to be withered and dried up to the roots. **So Jesus answered and said to them, "Have faith in God. 23 "For assuredly, I say to you, whoever says to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea,' and does not doubt in his heart, but believes that those things he says will be done, he will have whatever he says. (Mar 11:22-23 NKJ)**

Jesus is the true vine. There are many different vines out there, that is, many different things to believe in. But there is only one true vine, and His name is Jesus Christ. He is the vine, and God is the gardener or vinedresser. If you believe in Jesus, then you are a branch of His. But no matter who you are, the

gardener will cut you. ² **Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.**

This verse speaks to those who are Christians, and those who claim to be Christians. If you only claim to be a Christian, but truly don't believe in the name of our LORD, God, and Savior Jesus Christ, true God and true Man, then you will be cut off. The life saving force is removed when there is truly no faith. But to those who do believe, there is a cutting also. Why? So that you **will bear more fruit**

This cutting to the fruit bearing branches happens in two ways. First, it happens through the strengthening of faith. You are pruned by testing and tribulation. That's how faith is emboldened. I have a Pastor colleague who told me a story one of his members told him. She was an old woman who grew up during the depression. As a young girl, during the great depression, she and her whole family watched one night as their house burned down. All their earthly possessions were wiped out in one single night. She remembered thinking, "the only way we are going to survive this is by relying on God". And the same is true with us here today. The only thing that can't be taken away from us is our faith in our Savior Jesus. That is why God prunes us. It increases our dependence on Him, because at the end of the day there is nothing else to depend on!

The second way the fruit bearing branches are cut is by the Law. Yes, we believe that Jesus has saved us from our sins. And yet, we continue to sin. We believe, but we still need help with that unbelief. And that is what sin is, the fruit of unbelief. And that's what the law shows us, that we are sinful and that we have sinned against both God and men. We are cut to the heart when we realize this, and this is the pruning process God's holy law provides.

Fruits still get produced despite our sinful condition! **"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, and I**

am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.

There is a connection here in the Greek to a word we have in English. In verse 2 when Jesus says, **he prunes** it's the same kind of word in verse 3 **You are already clean**. The word for that pruning and cleaning idea is the same word from where we get our word, "Catharsis". The definition of that word is, "a purification or purgation that brings about spiritual renewal or release from tension". This is, quite simply, the Gospel. It tells us that we have been forgiven. We are made clean, as Jesus says **You are already clean**, through the death and resurrection of Christ. Jesus hadn't died yet when He spoke this, but His death has the same cleansing power before His life and death as it still does after it. Through that death and resurrection, we have spiritual renewal and release.

If the goal is to be fruitful, which clearly is seen to be the case from the example of the fig tree, there is only one way to go about it. And that is to remain in the true Vine. **A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.**

There is a heavy emphasis on "fruit" here. And of course there is. It's a big part of the picture Jesus is talking about. 7 times in the 8 verses the word is used. We need to produce fruits of faith. Why? Because that is the natural result of faith!

But there is only so much we can see. Perhaps you know of someone who has no faith, but a lot of fruit! This is certainly possible. We see people who do all kinds of "great" things. You don't need to have Jesus to do something considered to be great in the eyes of the world. But in the eyes of God, true good deeds can be done only through the good Savior. An atheist can be morally or civically righteous. This is a blessing to our environment. But it does nothing for their soul. The only way you can really produce fruits is through the fruitful, life giving Vine!

How do we go on living a fruitful and productive life in Christ? It's through Christ alone! Yes, the word "fruit" is emphasized 7 times in these 8 verses. But the word "remain" is also used 8 times in these 8 verses! **A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.** We need to remain in Him if we want to be fruitful! Connection to the Vine, Jesus, is the key to being truly fruitful!

⁶ If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, 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 done for you.

The branches that are dead are good for only one thing, the burn pile! My burn pile has gotten large as of late. It's full of leaves from last Fall and the Fall before that. It has branches of bushes long since dead. It has many different Blackberry vines in it as well. If I were looking to pick Blackberries, and went to the burn pile, how many berries would you expect me to find? None! It's only good for burning, and even that I do not do for any particular benefit, but just to get ride of it.

The faithless soul is also only worthy for the burn pile. This is not a joyful statement, rather a stark reminder. It is something that we need to remind ourselves of. What do we deserve? Not to be loving and tenderly pruned, but to wacked and slashed away. This is the case for any person who ever lived. **"There is none righteous, no, not one; 11 There is none who understands; There is none who seeks after God. 12 They have all turned aside; They have together become unprofitable; There is none who does good, no, not one." (Rom 3:10-12 NKJ)**

But this is why Jesus, the One who cursed the fruitless tree, was lifted up to die on THE cursed tree. He did so to pay for the sin of the whole world. They were all bundled up and heaped upon Him. The punishment our sins deserved were placed upon Him, the sinless Son of God. Jesus was thrown into the fire

and burned. He suffered hell on that cross. Why did He do this? **I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly. (John 10:10 NKJ)**

Where we only deserved God's eternal wrath and punishment, instead we have been given an opportunity to be grafted into the Vine of life! Paul builds upon this picture in Romans: **And if some of the branches were broken off, and you, being a wild olive tree, were grafted in among them, and with them became a partaker of the root and fatness of the olive tree, 18 do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, remember that you do not support the root, but the root supports you. 19 You will say then, "Branches were broken off that I might be grafted in." 20 Well said. Because of unbelief they were broken off, and you stand by faith. Do not be haughty, but fear. (Rom 11:17-20 NKJ)**

What is the point of this picture? It is a blessing that we wild trees have been given the gift of life and the fruit it produces. What should we do as a result? Keep it up! REMAIN!!! Remain in the Word. Remain in church, remain in the Word and Sacrament. Remain in Bible class and personal study at home. If you don't, you're going to dry up! So, stay connected! The fruit of the vine, and the bread of life, the true Body and Blood of Jesus Christ which we are about to receive here today is how we are watered and feed.

Why do we need this close connection, this communion? Because when we are apart from our Lord, that is when we grow wild and stop producing fruits! This one verse from our text really summarizes the whole text excellently. ⁵ **"I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.**

The point that Jesus makes here is quite clear. We need Him! Self-reliance is something that we as a culture and personally pride ourselves in. It is good to be able to provide for yourself and not depend on the charity of another. Self-made men are praised and

looked up to in our culture. But no one truly pulls themselves up by their own bootstraps alone. You can be misled to believe that. But the Christian knows from Scripture that it is only by God that we are able to do anything at all. He says here that those who remain in the Vine may **ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. 8 My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.**

Connection to the Vine, Jesus, is key. It is key because that Vine isn't dead. Rather it's alive and it is the entire source of life. Jesus died to pay for our sins. But He was also raised for our justification. This Vine lives and brings us back to life as well. There is catharsis through that Vine. We are made to be clean. Through that cleansing, we the branches aren't picked clean, rather we produced multiple fruits. We are able to do good deeds and great things through the power of the Vine. No longer do we need to shout at the top of our lungs like the lepers once did, "Unclean! Unclean!" Rather now we are white as wool, and as fruitful and the Vine itself is!

Spring is the season of growth and new life. Everywhere we go, we see green, we see blooming. We have been given both through Jesus. Whereas we were once dead and unfruitful, we have now been given life and produce fruits that reflect that! Therefore, dear Christians, REMAIN!!! Remain in the way, the truth, and the life! Remain in the Word and let that new life flow in you and direct your steps towards eternal life.

Jesus is the true Vine, and we are His branches. Even though we were worthy of the eternal burn pile, He has pruned us into living, fruitful branches that reflect His glory. Let yourselves be tended to by the Father, your Guardian and Gardener. Let the Law remove anything that hinders growth. Then let yourselves be cleansed in the blood of Christ, and remain in it! Without Jesus we are worthless and unclean. With Him, we are fruitful and living! Praise and thanks be to the living Lord, the eternal Vine who we have been grafted into! AMEN!!!