

Sermons at
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)
Reggie Denton, Pastor

May 2, 2021 (5th Sunday of Easter, Year B)
John 15:1-9
1 John 4:7-21

Yesterday, my family and I cleaned up our yard from the winter. One thing we find every year is several twigs, and even BRANCHES, that were TORN FROM the tree by the WINDS of winter. There's one very NOTICEABLE thing about the branches that lie there on the ground – they DIED.

I know what you're thinking: "Thought of that all by yourself, did ya?"

"Well, of COURSE they did! A branch can't live separated from the tree."

I know that too, but SEEING them lying there dead drove home the reality: "Apart from the tree the branch cannot survive."

It's a fact of nature that JESUS used as a metaphor for the CHRISTIAN LIFE. We can't LIVE and be FRUITFUL Christians APART from Christ, any more than those LIMBS could live after falling away from the trunk of the tree.

In Jesus' analogy, he compares HIMSELF to a VINE, while the fruit bearing BRANCHES are the disciples. God is depicted as the farmer, the one who CULTIVATES the vineyard. He waters and tends the soil, so that the vine is nourished and can grow. He takes pride in his crop.

What Jesus is saying is clear. We ARE GOD'S vineyard, but in order for us to bear fruit, and not become DEAD wood, we must abide in the VINE, the TRUE vine, Jesus Christ. To ABIDE in God means to make your ABODE (your HOME) in God, to LIVE IN God. It means staying connected to the source.

Let's UPDATE this parable to something we're a little more familiar with. People can do more and more on their computers all the time. I have more computing power on my smartphone here (hold up smartphone) than they had on the Apollo missions to the moon. This last year we have learned the POWER and CONVENIENCE of having a computer. When it's connected to the INTERNET, a person can check the news, sports and weather with the click of a button. And if you like to use tabs, you can it all at the same time. You can even have the weather forecast TAILORED to ANY city in the world. A person can send instant MESSAGES to ANYONE in the world who's connected too. You can do almost all of your BANKING on the Internet. You can simply transfer your money electronically to pay all your bills. You can go SHOPPING on the Internet for most ANYTHING these days. You can order your meals and have them DELIVERED to your home. I know several people who WORK from home by computer. I know of a person who lives in Wisconsin who designs and services communication satellites. The interesting thing is that his COMPANY is in California. He does almost all his work through the Internet from half a country away!

As FANTASTIC as all this is, it all depends on a very small piece of equipment. It depends on the connection between your computer or wireless router and the phone lines. (Show a picture or hold up a phone cord.) Imagine, ALL that information and data flowing through this thin phone line. If someone happened to cut the wire or pull it out of the wall, all those fantastic things we talked about would suddenly come to an end.

Connections are vitally important. What kind of relationship do you have to the outside world? What kind of relationship do you have with your children, your parents, your spouses? What kind of relationship do you have with God? It all depends on your CONNECTION. There's a very THIN CORD that MAKES this connection. A wire that can be EASILY CUT, and bring it all suddenly to an end.

There's a story of a native from a remote mountain village who visited a large modern city for the first time. He couldn't bring much home with him, and he had little money. But he was amazed at

all the electric lights he saw everywhere. So he bought a sack full of electric lights bulbs and sockets with switches so he could turn them on and off.

When he got home, he hung the light bulbs in front of his house and on his and his neighbor's trees. Everyone watched him with curiosity and asked him what he was doing, but he just smiled and said, "Just wait until dark--you'll see."

But when night came and he turned on the switches, nothing happened.

No one had told him about electricity. He didn't know that the light bulbs were useless unless they were connected to the source of their power.

Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." There are a lot of people who don't know that the way they're living their LIVES is USELESS. They got the education; they got the job; they made the family; they bought the home; but when the sun sets and NIGHT comes, they reach for the switch and NOTHING happens. They don't know that there's a source, which MAKES all these things LIGHT UP!

DISCIPLES receive THEIR power, their STRENGTH from JESUS. HE is the SOURCE, the TRUE vine. If we break away from him, we're like unproductive branches and die and bear no fruit.

It raises a question that we ALL must answer: ARE we bearing fruit for the Kingdom of God? How can you tell an apple tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell a PEAR tree? By the fruit that it bears. How can you tell a CHRISTIAN? By the fruit that WE bear. Do our LIVES LIGHT UP, or fade away? It's just as simple as that.

The fruits of the vine are not JUST church attendance, or Biblical knowledge, or your individual stewardship. Even though all of those things are important, and things we obviously need to WORK on, the TRUE fruit of the vine, as we heard in our other readings, is LOVE and COMPASSION. Folks, it all comes down to this – how do you TREAT people?

A Pastor tells a story of a particular lady who was in his little country church in Tennessee: "It was interesting to me," he said, "that before I even met her, everyone was TELLING me about her. They were saying that she was such a RELIGIOUS person. It's TRUE that every time she came to church she brought her Bible with her. Indeed, everywhere she would go all over TOWN, she took her Bible with her. At the evening worship we would frequently call upon lay people to pray, and she would always be the first to stand, and her prayers were nothing short of exquisite. It seemed like the subject of religion was ALWAYS on her mind, in fact, almost to a fault. She almost didn't know how to carry on a simple conversation WITHOUT bringing that up. I didn't have any problem with any of these things."

The pastor went on though, "The PROBLEM that I had was that when it came to people who were DOWN in society--the poor, the unemployed, divorced persons, alcoholics--she was RELENTLESS in her CRITICISM. She was WITHOUT mercy and compassion. There was judgment and NOTHING else. After a while, despite all of these outward APPEARANCES of religion, and despite everyone CALLING her a "religious" person, I had to begin asking myself the question: Does this person really bear the FRUITS of the Christian life?"

The issue is NOT how much knowledge you have, or even necessarily how SINCERE you are. The issue is – how do you TREAT people? If you are IN Christ, people will be able to SEE the fruits of your life in your COMPASSION and love and ATTITUDE.

"I am the vine, you are the branches," Jesus said. These are words of promise. We LIVE IN HIM and HE is us. Because of that connection, he provides for our every need. He gives us life. He gives us an identity and a purpose. He makes us grow and thrive and be fruitful. "Make your home in me," he says, "and I will give you life."

In the words of 1 John: "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is FROM God; everyone who loves is BORN of God and KNOWS God. ... God IS love, and those who ABIDE in love abide in GOD, and God abides in THEM."

THAT, my friends, is the SOURCE, the source of EVERYTHING – the source of our strength, the source of our joy, the SOURCE of our LIFE.

Abide in God's love. LIVE God's love. And let it bear fruit. Amen.