

Sermon for Easter 5B

The Text: John 15:1-8

The colours of autumn are lovely. There's something so pleasing to the eye of seeing deep red leaves on decorative vines. Many a vine branch in autumn has been cut off for a display in the church. The irony is that, as vibrant and spectacular as the branches are, they are going to die, because they are not connected to the trunk of the vine. They have no means of receiving the nutrients from the root system through the trunk. Only the branches that are connected to the vine will live, because only they receive the life-giving sustenance that they need for life and growth.

This is the image that Jesus uses to teach us the deep truth that we need to remain in Him to truly live. This image of the vine and branches that Jesus uses in today's text was a common Old Testament symbol used for God's people Israel. It's likely that Jesus borrowed from Psalm 80 where Israel is referred to as the vine that God brought out of Egypt, and where there is also the reference to God's judgement on this vine, on it being cut down and burned with fire. In fact, wherever Israel is mentioned as a vine in the Old Testament, God judges this vine for its failure to fulfil its calling to produce fruit for Him.

Because the Jews were ancestors of Abraham, they thought they had an irrevocable membership ticket to heaven. So instead of placing their faith in God they trusted in themselves and their heritage. Especially the religious sect of the Pharisees who thought they were in a right standing with God by observing the Law. They tried to observe God's commandments so perfectly that they made other commandments to supposedly help them not accidentally break them—around 600 of them! And they trusted in their abilities to keep these human-made rules. The Pharisees thought that they were pretty righteous before God and they had the external display to show it. But this wasn't the fruit that God was looking for, because their hearts were not humble but full of self-pride; their spirituality was not a sincere faith. God had been looking for fruit from a sincere faith from Israel, but He had found none.

That's why Jesus said of them in Matthew 15:

*'These people honour me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from Me.
They worship me in vain;
their teachings are but rules taught by men.'*

That's why Jesus says today: "...apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."

In our text Jesus proclaims Himself to be the 'true vine', in contrast to wayward Israel. Yet Jesus is not so concerned in rebuking Israel as He is in warning His disciples not to suffer the same fate. Jesus speaks directly to His disciples as a group—the 'you' is

plural—and He commands them to remain in Him. To remain in Jesus implies that the disciples *are already* in Him, and He in them...but also that this vital connection can be broken. And the disciples can break it should they, like Israel, resist God's grace often enough that they grow cold to Jesus and seek their own desires above Jesus' Word. And if they separate themselves from Jesus and His Word, they will simply not be producing the fruit that God requires of them.

The warning that Jesus extended to His disciples in this text, He extends to His church today in every place, even to us here—remain in Him, for apart from Him, you can do nothing. Take care that we don't lose our focus on Jesus or grow indifferent to a daily personal walk with Him. Not continually abiding in Jesus means cutting ourselves off from the Lord of life, and so, ultimately, spiritual suicide. Jesus warns us against this: *"I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit...If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned."*

This seems a harsh judgement, but it's simply realistic. If a vine is expected to bear fruit, branches that don't are not fulfilling their natural function; they are of no useful purpose; they're out of place.. Faith should yield the fruit of good works. Good works are evidence that a person has received salvation by grace from God. It is evidence that God has grafted us into His life of blessing to be a blessing to others; to be a branch bursting forth with an abundant yield of grapes. Such amazing love that we have received from God in Christ will be the source of life to praise God and serve Him and all those we come across.

But we don't reach a certain level of fruit production and are then excused from this requirement. In our text, Jesus tells us that our fruit production is to be constant: "Every branch bearing fruit is pruned, in order that they may bear *even more* fruit." Jesus warns us to take care that we never tire of remaining in Him, or of bearing fruit. He warns us not to slide like Israel, so that we don't risk our love for Jesus growing cold, lest we become spiritually barren, and our faith wither, and die.

Despite the severity of the warnings in our text, Jesus also proclaims His wonderful gospel to us. He reveals to us the loving heart of His Father in what is really an astonishing proclamation. It begins with verse 3: *"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."* We are not made righteous or worthy before God by any of the fruit we bear. None of our efforts could ever earn favour with God. Jesus is the one who earned God's favour for us. Because He was the one who lived a perfect, sinless life for us. He walked to the Cross carrying our broken humanity. He took our unclean heart as His own. Upon His outstretched arms He bore all our failings, our shame, our guilt, our selfishness, our pride, our hurtful words, the thoughts and attitudes that we often keep covered under our religious exteriors. He changed places with us there. He took it all from us and gave us His righteousness; His holiness; His purity, to rescue us from our just sentence of death and give us eternal life.

Jesus says: "You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you." Through trusting in Jesus' promise we are already forgiven and right with God—completely by His grace.

But this is just the start. The very fact that we have this Gospel reading today; the very fact that we have God's Holy Scriptures shows us that God is a God who dearly wants us to know Him personally. For unless we had God's word, how would we know about Him? Just think about that for a minute. We know through the majesty and intricacy of creation that there must be a God out there, an all-powerful Creator...but there is no other way we can know about Jesus and His Saving work unless we hear about it. Unless God Himself reveals to us who we are as sinners and who Christ is as our Saviour. Think how blessed you really are to have received God's word. If we had never heard or read about our Saviour where would we be? One of the branches detached from the vine.

But Jesus doesn't want us detached from the vine. He wants us to really know Him. He wants to lavish His blessing on us. He wants us to have fullness of life as we live with Him. As we remain in Him by remaining in His word, He grows us in faith and the fruit that comes from faith. He says, "*You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*" Jesus has given us a new status; a new identity. We aren't just pronounced to be clean; to be right and just; we *are* clean. We have been made clean by Jesus.

It is astonishing that the God who created the universe would want to know each one of us individually, personally, but that's God's heart for all people. The One through whom all things came into existence came to this earth and was born as a human baby for us. He knew everything about us before time began. He called us to be part of His family. He wants a relationship with us; a deep personal relationship where security and peace flourish. God wants to share His blessing with His people. Jesus is the true vine; we are the branches. The vine brings life-giving nutrients through the roots to the branches so that they can flourish and bear fruit. Jesus wants to give us His very life and blessing—fullness of life. He wants to keep feeding us with the sustenance of His word and meeting us through it.

Jesus will always be nurturing us, guiding us, providing for us, comforting us, giving us joy as we walk with Him through His word. We will all struggle to begin or recapture the habit of our devotional time. But as we do, sometimes not understanding what the text means, sometimes not gaining a fresh insight, sometimes not feeling like doing it, we have the confidence that Jesus is remaining with us, blessing us, through His word.

Our Heavenly Father was so concerned to restore us to a right relationship with Himself, and for us to know Him personally in a relationship of true life and joy, that He sent His only Son Jesus into the world and to the Cross for us. On the Cross, Jesus was made the fruitless branch and suffered the fate of it in your place. It is the Good News of that substitution that has made each of us clean; that has forgiven us all our sins. As Jesus abides in us through His word, he promises to remain in union with us. Our God is loyal and committed to us no matter what. In our remaining in Jesus through our meditations in His word, we can never question His commitment. He never tires of wooing us to Him, of speaking His words of life to us, of lavishing His blessing on us. As He does, He will strengthen us to fulfil our calling as holy priests for the sake of the world, to be branches belonging to Him, laden with fruit. Amen.