

5<sup>th</sup> Sunday of Easter / Confirmation

May 2, 2021

Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church

John 15:1-8

## **The True Vine**

### **John 15:1-8**

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> 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. <sup>3</sup> You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup> 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. <sup>5</sup> “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. <sup>6</sup> 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. <sup>7</sup> If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. <sup>8</sup> This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.*

Dear Friends in Christ,

The toddler doesn’t want any help putting on his shoes. “Me do it!” he insists. And eventually that child will learn to put his shoes on the correct feet and even how to tie his own shoes. The Kindergarten student doesn’t want help picking out her clothes for school. “I can do it myself” she announces. And the outfit may or may not match but eventually she will pick out her own clothes every day. The teenager complains when dad gives them clear instructions for operating the car while they are learning to drive. “Dad, I know all that!” And eventually they learn and drive off all by themselves. Children are dependent on their parents for almost everything at the beginning of life. Slowly they gain skills and abilities and become independent adults. This is good even if there were many struggles to get to the point of independence.

While it is good for children to move from dependence on their parents to independence, this is not what our Lord wants to happen in our relationship with him. Jesus uses the imagery of a grapevine to illustrate the disastrous results of becoming independent of Christ, who is the True Vine. Independent branches die. Instead of death apart from the True Vine, Christ encourages his people to stay connected, to remain dependent on him. Dependent branches live. We rejoice in Christ, the True Vine who gives us life.

### **Independent Branches Die**

*I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup> He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit.... <sup>6</sup> 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.*

Jesus spoke these words to his disciples on Maundy Thursday before they left the upper room to go to the Garden of Gethsemane. Soon, the disciples would be in the garden with trees and branches and maybe even some grapevines. Soon, these disciples would be confronted with the hatred of the world against Christ. Soon these disciples would run away in fear when Jesus was arrested. Jesus warns them beforehand of what happens if they do not remain dependent and attached to Christ. Quite simply, they will die if not connected to Christ.

So how do believers become like those branches that no longer produce fruit which are cut off

the vine? It could happen slowly or quickly. It usually happens over many years. They were baptized as a child and made it through catechism class to be confirmed. But then they stopped. They still believed that Jesus died for them but they stopped reading the Bible. They stopped going to church. They stopped receiving Communion after those first few times. Over time, while they claimed to be Christian, they were not doing what Christians do or believing what Christians believe. The branch lost its connection to the vine and died. The Father cuts off those branches, showing them to be dead already.

This destruction of faith can also happen quickly. The disciples faced big challenges to their faith in Christ due to persecution in the years following Christ's death and resurrection. Judas fell away before Christ's death. The other eleven would remain in Christ. However, some who professed faith in Christ in the years before persecution would renounce their faith when persecution started.

Someone who grew up in the Christian faith and specifically the Lutheran faith may encounter some shocking ideas when they go into the world, ideas that shake their faith. Someone could tell them about a burial box with the name of Jesus on it, attempting to show that Jesus died and stayed dead. Do you have an answer for that challenge? There is always the challenge of creation in 6 days vs whatever the historical science theory of the day is. This one shakes branches loose from the True Vine far too often. Do you have a response? Or someone may attack the life and character of Martin Luther calling him things like antisemitic. Do you have a response to that?

There are many difficult questions and challenges to the Bible and faith in Christ. The problem does not come when we don't have an immediate response. The problem to our faith comes when we don't look for a response from the right sources. If one only listens to those who attack the faith, you can find plenty of books, magazine articles, websites and online videos that will support that attack. Instead, we are to go to the source of truth, the Word of Christ. Go and ask your pastor the tough questions. He will not ridicule you for asking but will help you find the answers and responses in God's Word.

The devil, the world and our sinful nature do everything they can to independence from Christ seem appealing. Don't be deceived. Independent branches die. Those who are not connected to the True Vine will suffer eternal death.

### **Dependent Branches Live**

But dependent branches live!

*You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.*

Do you remember what the disciples argued about this very evening in the upper room? They argued about which of them was the greatest. And Jesus says they are clean. Peter would draw his sword that night and cut off a man's ear. And Jesus says he is clean. Peter would deny knowing Jesus three times that night and Jesus says he is clean! You and I have neglected God's Word at times in our lives. We have let our pride lead to angry outburst and maybe even physical violence. And sometimes our faith in Christ might be shaken by the accusations and assertions of Christ's enemies. And Jesus says that we are clean!

His gospel message is for you and for me. Christ paid for our sins by his suffering and death and rose for our justification. Because of Christ, God declares that we are not guilty of the sins we committed. Through Christ's Word we are clean from sin.

This fact makes us dependent on Christ. We want to stay connected to the True Vine always. He gives us spiritual life. He forgives our sins. He makes us clean. I never want to be independent from the life giving Vine. The confirmands will make promises to continue to remain in Christ. They will promise to continue to hear his Word, to receive Holy Communion often and to suffer all things, even death, rather than fall away from faith in Christ. May the Lord help all of us to keep such promises and may we all help each other to remain in Christ until eternal life.

*<sup>5</sup> "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."*

Godless societies in the history of the world have accomplished great things. Great walls, pyramids and coliseums have been built. However, these are nothing when done apart from Christ. No truly good work can be done apart from Christ. Regularly being fed with the gospel is the only way to produce good fruit in your life.

The greatness of the work in the world shows the greatness of the person who did it. But not for the Christian. The fruit we produce of good works shows the greatness of our Savior, to whom we are connected.

So we can be independent branches who can do nothing good, are cut off the vine, wither, die and are burned in the fire. Or we can remain what we were made in baptism, dependent children of God. For then we have life now and forever through Christ. We are clean of sins through Christ and we are able to produce fruits of faith through Christ. May the Lord keep us dependent on him forever.

Amen.