

John 15:1-8
Easter 5B + April 29, 2018
Good Shepherd Lutheran Church + Boise, Idaho
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Vine and Branches

The Word of the Lord from John 15:3-4: Jesus said, "Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. Abide in Me, and I in you. As the branch cannot bear fruit by itself, unless it abides in the vine, neither can you, unless you abide in Me." This is the Word of the Lord.

Dear hearers in Christ, He is risen! He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

Jesus says, "I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in Me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing." It's another I AM statement, by the way: Jesus is saying, "I am Yahweh and I am the vine." You're the branches, so take some time to marvel at this: you're not just a lowly being recognized by an almighty deity, but He so honors you for the sake of Christ that you are joined to Him. That's means-of-grace language. Jesus joins you to Himself in baptism, uniting you with Him in His death and His resurrection. It's by water and the Word that you're a branch joined to the vine.

To put it another way, branches don't do the work of joining the vine. They're either born out of the vine or grafted in. Your life in Christ is given from outside of you.

What do branches do? They grow fruit. It's just what happens naturally in God's creation. Branches that are connected to vines, that receive water and nourishment from vines, are going to grow and bear fruit. They don't have to be coaxed, cajoled, reminded or motivated. Living branches bear fruit. It's just what they do.

Unless, of course, there's something wrong – something that is interfering with God's design. A fungus or some other disease might attack the branch, or some sort of pest might invade; and as the branch suffers the attack, it ceases bearing fruit and starts to die. Left to the assault, the branch will eventually wither away. That's where the vinedresser comes in. He checks the branches. If he finds a problem, he does what he can to get rid of it. He does what he can to rid the branch of whatever keeps it from doing what branches do. Once the branch is free of the attack, it gets back to bearing fruit once again.

The vinedresser also prunes, of course. A pruned branch produces more and better fruit than one that grows wild. The branch may not look good for a while once it's been pruned back; but in the long run, the pruning is for the branch's good.

Occasionally, a good-looking branch doesn't bear fruit. It might look right, but it's not doing what it's supposed to. That sort of branch is removed and gathered for kindling, and thus its true colors are revealed: for as a dried-up stick for the fire, it's doing as much as it was on the vine, since it wasn't bearing fruit anyway.

All that said, here's the point: branches bear fruit. It's just what they do. From the vinedresser's perspective, vine-dressing isn't about telling the branch to produce fruit, but to keep watch and get rid of whatever would keep the branch from doing what it naturally does.

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Now to our text. Jesus begins by setting the stage: He says, "I am the true vine, and My Father is the vinedresser." You're the branches – and what do branches do? They bear fruit. They just naturally

bear fruit. So Jesus says, "Every branch in Me that does not bear fruit He takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit He prunes, that it may bear more fruit."

Fruit. That's the good works of the Christian. Because they are joined to Christ the vine, Christians just naturally do good works. They can't help but to do good works, because they're joined to Christ.

In some ways, you're doing more good works than you know, because you do good works by living out your ordinary, everyday life as a Christian. A day at work at the company or the classroom, or on the factory floor, or at home with the kids is a day of good work before God, because that's where God has placed you to labor. Reading your kids a bedtime story or training the dog or mowing the lawn or conversation with spouse or friend – these too are good works for branches joined to the vine. Did you have breakfast this morning? It was good before God because you're joined to Christ. Did you skip breakfast and fast before the Lord's Supper? It was good before God because you're joined to Christ.

Sound a little silly that God would delight in such things? Let's mix metaphors for a moment. You've come across new parents before, or perhaps you've been one yourself. You know how new parents are – they delight in the silliest things about their kid. If their kid gave a goofy, one-tooth grin after eating half a spoonful of broccoli and wearing the other half on his face, they're going to delight in that smile so much that they're going to take fourteen pictures of it on their iPhone. Then they're going to show all fourteen pictures to you. They will delight in those photos because this is their kid. You will probably be less delighted, because this is not your kid.

God delights in you because you're His kid. You're born – born again – into His family by water and the Word, an adoption bought with the blood of His only-begotten Son. God treasures you far more than parents treasure their newborn child – not because you're cute or you've earned it, but because you're His. And as parents delight in every step their child takes, so God delights in what you do. So what you do in the callings God has given you is pleasing to Him.

Back to the language of our text. Jesus puts it this way: "Already you are clean because of the Word that I have spoken to you." It's a play on words: the word for *pruning* is the same as the word for *cleaning*. Jesus says that you're a branch, fully pruned and cleaned of sin and ready to bear fruit because God has pruned and cleaned and readied you by His holy Word. Because of Christ and His grace, you're fully prepared now to do good works and bear much fruit.

This helps us with another question: what about non-Christians who do good things? Are these good works and fruits before God? I once wrote an article that said "no," and promptly received an email from a pastor with a link to a YouTube video of a Hindu man who had sold all he had to feed the poor in his city. Wasn't this a good work, the pastor asked? Here's the answer: God used the man's generosity for the good of the poor in that city. However, the man was doing it in service to Hindu gods, not Jesus. As he worked in service to other gods, he failed to point to Jesus as the Savior; and, in fact, he was pointing people to trust in other gods instead. To use the metaphor of parents and children, the man claimed to be a "child" of a different god, wanting their delight instead of the Lord's. He was bearing fruit on a different vine, not bearing it as one joined to Christ. It might be helpful to others, but it's not pleasing to God; as Jesus says in our text, "Apart from Me you can do nothing."

As one joined to Christ, your everyday life is full of good works. Your everyday life is full of good fruit.

Of course, you could be doing a lot more, bearing a lot more fruit, doing amazing things, but there's a problem. Not every work you do is good, and not every fruit is God-pleasing. Sin still clings to you, and so you spend way too much of your day with sinful thoughts, words and deeds. These aren't good works, but bad works; not good fruit, but bad fruit. These sins keep you from bearing more fruit

than you do: imagine how much more good you could do if your thoughts weren't crowded with lust and covetousness, with sloth and selfishness, with worry and doubt, with anger and resentment. These sins take up time and energy and devotion: they're the equivalent of fungus and disease and bugs on a branch. You could be doing so much more good and bearing so much more fruit; but compared to God's desire for you, instead you're sort of a puny twig with a berry or two to show for it.

Don't be content with being that way. See, a huge temptation is for people to think, "Since I'm baptized and attached to the vine, neither good works nor my favorite sins matter. I can live the way I want because I'm going to heaven." But your sins are no more static than disease on a plant or aphids on a rose: they're at work to kill. If you're content to let those sins run rampant, one of two things happens: you break yourself off from Christ, because you'd rather have your sin than remain in Him; or the Father cuts you off the vine because you weren't bearing fruit – because you preferred sin instead. So Jesus warns, "If anyone does not abide in Me he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned."

We need to state this carefully: such a one is not condemned because he wasn't bearing enough fruit. He's condemned because he didn't want to be joined to Christ, and the lack of fruit was just the indication of the rejection of Jesus. Or to quote a memorable phrase: faith alone saves, but faith is never alone. A live branch is always bearing fruit.

But back to good works and good fruits and your life as a Christian. I will be first to admit that I don't spend a lot of time telling you to do this or that good work, and here is the reason why. Remember the role of the vinedresser? He doesn't have to tell the branches to bear fruit, because that's what branches *do*. Instead, the vinedresser's task is to prune, to get rid of all the stuff that prevents the branch from bearing fruit. In service to God the Father-Vinedresser, that's the pastor's task: not so much to tell you to bear good fruit, because that's what Christians *do*. Instead, the pastor's task is to tell you to repent of all the sin that keeps you from doing it, all the sin that's working to kill you and cut you off from Jesus. If you repent of your sins and you receive absolution, what's left? Only good. So, for instance, if you're not breaking the 5th commandment with hatred and anger, what's left? A God-pleasing life lived in peace. If you're not breaking the 6th commandment with immorality, what is left? A fruitfully chaste, sexually pure life. If, by the grace of God and the work of the Holy Spirit within you, you're avoiding those sins that keep tripping you up – if you're not busy bearing bad fruit, what's left? Bearing good fruit.

We should briefly address a particular temptation that comes with this good news, and that is the temptation to say, "Since my life is so full of good works, I really don't need to do any more. I am doing enough – let somebody else do what I could be doing, and I'll look after me." Everyone here can identify with this sentiment, and everyone has said it. Beware: when you do say it, you're saying, "I would like to bear less fruit. I do not want to be as fruitful as Christ has enlivened me to be." When you say that, you're on your way to withering. Repent. Turn from your conniving to bear less fruit. What's left if you do? More fruit, for the sake of Jesus.

That's why the message of the Church nearly always focuses not on good works, but on repentance and the forgiveness of sins. "Stop sinning," we proclaim. "Turn from sin and be forgiven," for forgiven people bear fruit. "Stop dying," we declare. "By the grace of God, remain in Christ and live," and living people in Christ bear fruit. When we do proclaim good works, the message really doesn't change. When we say, "Do this," implied in the message had better be "do this *instead of that sin*, because that sin is not what you should be doing as a Christian." In other words, repent, be forgiven; and now, here's some fruit you can do as a branch joined to Christ.

Jesus puts it this way in our text: "If you abide in Me, and My words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. By this My Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be My disciples." Abide – remain – in Jesus. Stay joined to Him as branch to vine. Continue to hear His

Word – His holy, forgiving, cleansing Word. As that Word abides in you, whatever you ask will be done for you – because whatever you ask will be in keeping with what God promises in His Word. Remain in Him, and you will bear much fruit. And so the Father delights, because His Son’s death on the cross is not in vain: you bear much fruit because you have life in Him by His holy Word, because you are forgiven for all of your sins.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen