

Our Redeemer Lutheran Church
Quincy, IL
Rev. Stephen Southward

Easter 5
Saturday, May 1, 2021 at 5:00 p.m.
Sunday, May 2, 2021 at 9:00 a.m.

“Let Us Abide In Christ”

John 16: 1-8

Now as we settle back to hear what God has to say to us today, I would assume that most of us are hoping that we will hear some word of comfort and encouragement to help us get through the struggles of this past week and to make a new start this coming week. And our Gospel lesson for this Sunday morning doesn't let us down. Jesus has a word of comfort and encouragement for us. Here in the first part of these verses we hear Jesus tell us, “I am the vine.” “You are the branches.” “Abide in me,” or as the NIV says “remain in me.” That sounds very secure and warm. And we could use some security and comfort and warmth right now because life presents us with our fair share of insecurities and challenges. Now we hear Jesus says, “Abide in me.” It is a nice image of what it can be like following Jesus. It is a picture much like the one we had last Sunday of Jesus the Good Shepherd. “I am the Good Shepherd, Jesus told us. “I know my own and my own know me.” The image of a shepherd lovingly carrying a lamb and guiding his flock to safe green pastures is certainly a comforting and pleasant image to have of Jesus. In our Introit that we said together from Psalm 1 it speaks about the person who is rooted in God like a tree planted by streams of water, a tree that cannot be uprooted, a tree that stands sure and solid because it has its roots firm and secure in the river bank and watered by a flowing stream. The

psalm begins, "Blessed is the man, he is like a tree planted by streams of water." The tree, meaning you and me, yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that we do we prosper. (Psalm 1:3) What a wonderful thought which tells us that we are safe and secure grafted in the Lord. We long for that kind of security, and we find it in Jesus. So this morning we hear Jesus' image of a vine. He is the vine, his Father is the vinedresser, or gardener and we are the branches. He says, "Abide in me, and I in you." (John 15:4) Now here Jesus uses the word "abide" 7 times in these few verses so I think he is trying to make a point. By repeating the word "abide" he is stressing the relationship, the connectedness that needs to exist between the vine and the branch, between Jesus and us. We cannot live a complete life without remaining or abiding in Christ Jesus our Lord. In a relationship with Christ there is hope, there is comfort, there is strength to face the unknown, there is forgiveness when we are hard on ourselves for our failures, there is light when there is only darkness, there is a reason for doing something even when it's hard going and everyone else has given up, there is love that will cause us to do some exciting and amazing things for others. When Jesus said, "Abide in me, he is encouraging us to remain united to him, and he will remain united to us.

There is something calming and comfortable about that and at the same time there is something exciting and adventurous. Being close to Jesus and having Jesus close to us, well, that's a great feeling. He is continually present with us. There is a constant connection like a branch on a vine. His life and our lives are interconnected. But Jesus doesn't stay with this calming, warm feeling. This is where it starts to get more challenging. Now before I go on first let me ask all of you this question. "What is the purpose of a grapevine?" Is it to give shade? Is it the kind of plant you put in your front garden as the main featured plant? These are silly questions really because we all know that if we plant a grape vine

in our gardens the only reason we do so is because we want to harvest some grapes. And for the branches of the vine to grow fruit, fruit that is rich, and beautiful, and delicious, the branches must be connected to the vine and be nourished by the vine. There is a relationship here between the branch and the vine. And my friends, Jesus is trying to get the point across to us that producing fruit is a natural consequence of the relationship we have with him. So Jesus says, "Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit." Now notice here that he does not say, "Those who work their guts out at being fruitful, at being loving, just, peaceful, gentle, self-controlled, patient and so on, will by doing so find themselves connected to me." The equation runs the other way round. In other words we are to be strengthened by our connection to Jesus Christ. And when we remain grafted firmly on to the vine, we are able to draw deeply on the sap that is God's Spirit and that he enables us to be fruitful. Now there are some Christians who have taken the attitude that living the Christian life, bearing good fruit is just a matter of pure determination, right attitude and willpower and they can produce loving and gentle behavior and a generous, positive and compassionate attitude toward other people. All that is required is good motivation and just a little bit of Jesus and the church for good measure if needed. That's the American, works righteous style of Christian, you know the independent, do it yourself, not too religious kind of person.

And some people do a pretty good job at it, for a while. But with no real connection to Jesus they set about becoming the most Christ like people they can be, polite, gentle, generous, cheerful, reliable, and forgiving. They are remarkable. They keep it up for a while, even for years, but if there is no connection to the vine, if there is no ability to draw on the life giving sap of the Spirit, then sooner or later the energy is gone. Unfortunately I've seen vibrant active Christians fall suddenly like dry withered branches, especially when the

trials and hardships of life come upon them. We see what happens to a branch that is snapped off completely or is broken and hangs by a few fibers to the tree. The once green and supple branch becomes dry and lifeless and snaps off at the first pressure or temptation. Jesus said, "Apart from me you can do nothing." Well, in the same way without the relationship, without that connection with Jesus it only takes a small puff of wind, a small issue or test and the branch snaps off completely. Faith and its fruit are lost.

You see being connected to Jesus makes us more resilient, more willing to be tolerant, and less judgmental. It make us more willing to forgive, more open to guidance from others and from the Holy Spirit. It enables us to be more willing to accept the failings of others and less likely to lose it and get angry when our opinion differs from others. Yes, when we are connected to Jesus, the Vine, we are more pliable and flexible, meaning, we can get bent out of shape and not break. See, it's easier to knock back Satan's temptations when connected to Christ and when we do give in it's easier to bounce back because we know that we belong to him and are joined to him in baptism and receive assurance of that forgiveness in Holy Communion. Whatever life throws at us, it's easier to face connected to Jesus, the Vine. Without the vital nutrients of the Vine we would become brittle and break. Jesus said, "Anyone who does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers; and the branches are gathered, and thrown into the fire, and burned." With these words, Jesus is telling us that when the connection with the vine has been severed and there is no fruit, the branches are useless.

If there is no fruit, if there are no results from our discipleship, then there is a cost to pay. The question then that remains, that needs to be asked by all of us is, How do we remain connected to the Vine, Jesus, so that we are able to bear good fruit? Well, first, we have to realize that a branch doesn't grow itself. It

comes from the vine. It is a part of the vine and it can't exist separately from the vine. The branch has no life without the vine. In the same way, as Christians, we have no life apart from Christ. We are uniquely and intimately interconnected with Christ. At any time when that connection becomes anything less than what Jesus intends it to be, then you and I can be certain there is something happening in our lives that is choking our relationship with Jesus. And that leads me to the second point. Jesus talks about the vinedresser, or gardener cleaning up the useless dry branches on the vines. If there is something that is stopping us from bearing fruit, it is all the useless dry branches and leaves in our lives that need to be cut away. We may think that this kind of dryness makes us look attractive especially to the world around us, but it will not help us in any way to bear fruit that will bring glory to God. We may think that to be successful in business we need to have a zeal that rides roughshod over other people, to have no regard for the feelings of people or for their needs. We may think that to be successful in life we need to trust no one, look out for ourselves first, take what you can get or else someone else will get it. We may think that we are winning our children's favor and approval by giving in to their every want and desire. But to bear the kind of fruit that Jesus is looking for means to prune away all this dry useless stuff so that the Holy Spirit can cause real fruit to grow, the fruit of love, joy, peace, patience and self-control.

Now the third point here asks the question, How do we abide, how do we remain connected to the Vine, Jesus? Well, the answer is this. We can't do it by ourselves. Like a branch on the vine we need the nutrients that come from the vine in order to be happy, healthy and fruitful. Those nutrients that we need come to us in the form of God's Word and the Sacraments. They are the key ingredients for us as Christians and we need a constant supply for our well-being. That's why regular attendance at worship is so important. When we gather here

feeling withered and drooping, Jesus takes us and re-grafts us into himself. He refreshes us with his Word and Sacraments. It's here, the green shoots and leaves begin to sprout. Reading and studying the Bible and devotions are also of vital importance to us. When we read and listen to God's promises we are given the strength and vitality that are necessary for our survival as Christians. The Bible helps us choose what is God pleasing and what is the world's way. When things go all wrong for us, God's Word gives us the assurance of Jesus love and the joy and peace that comes from knowing that we can face anything with him by our side.

In Baptism and Holy Communion we are certain of the special relationship that Jesus has with us and of the special and intimate love that he has for each of us even when we let him down so badly. We are loved and forgiven and so we are able to love and to forgive others and then bear the fruit that is an essential part of our Christian life. Yes, "Abide in me," Jesus encourages. "I will do the rest, my life will flow into you and you will find all you have been searching for and much more." So my fellow brothers and sisters in Christ, take time to read through these verses again from John 15 slowly. They are words that bring encouragement and comfort but they also lead us to acknowledge that too often we become disconnected from the life giving nutrients of the Vine, Jesus. So it is my prayer then that these words of Jesus lead us to be fruitful branches, deeply grafted into Jesus the true vine so that we can bear much fruit to the glory of God. I praise God that this is so for us all.

IN JESUS NAME. AMEN!