

ALIVE IN CHRIST

John 15:1-8

Fifth Sunday of Easter (Series B)

April 29, 2018

Trinity Free Lutheran Church, Grand Forks, ND

The gospel lesson for the Fifth Sunday of Easter comes from *The Gospel According to John*, chapter 15, verses 1 through 8. It is on page 764 of the pew Bible. In this gospel lesson, Jesus teaches us how to live. Please stand as you are able for the gospel. From John 15, beginning at verse 1, we read in Jesus' name.

¹ "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinedresser. ² 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. ³ Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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. ⁵ 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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.

Father, these are your words. Sanctify us in the truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

You may be seated.

Alleluia! Christ is Risen!

He is risen indeed! Alleluia!

We keep saying that because it's still Easter. Really, living on this side of Christ's resurrection, every day is Easter, because Jesus lives and reigns forevermore, and we live in him.

But for our liturgical purposes of trying to give appropriate attention to the different parts of Jesus' ministry, Easter is a seven-week season. And Easter isn't the same every week. We consider different historical aspects of it and the various benefits Christ's resurrection has for us. This week, from this gospel lesson, we consider the benefit that we are alive in Jesus Christ.

This is what Jesus teaches with the imagery of the vine and the branches. Jesus compares himself to a vine—probably a grape vine, because that's what they had in Israel. And we are the branches. We learn from this that Jesus is the literal source of our spiritual lives now and our resurrection from the dead on the Last Day. We live in him. He is the source of our life, and if we are disconnected from him, like a broken off branch, we die.

So everything in our life as Christians is about Jesus. When we talk about sin and forgiveness, we want to talk about Jesus. When we talk about sickness, death, heaven, and eternal life, we want to talk about Jesus. When we talk about Baptism, the Lord's Supper, prayer, and worship, we want to talk about Jesus. Even when we talk about good works, we want to talk about Jesus.

Sometimes people ask, “Pastor, why don’t we talk more about good works?” Now I don’t really accept the premise of the question. The premise is that we don’t talk very much about good works, or at least not enough. And I don’t think that’s true. I think we talk about them the right amount. But if you disagree, you are certainly welcome to say so. And, especially if I’m preaching on a particular passage that mentions certain good works, and I ignore them, then you really should call me out on it, because my aim is to mention them exactly as often as the Scriptures mention them.

But I recognize and admit the fact that good works are rarely, if ever, the focus of a sermon. And this passage is part of the reason why. Jesus says,

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. 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. (15:4-5)

Good works, or what Jesus here refers to as “fruit,” does not come about in our lives by focusing on the fruit. The fruit comes about in our lives when we abide in Jesus. So this is at least part of the reason why we don’t always focus on good works, but we do always focus on Jesus. If we want to understand that our sins are forgiven, we should talk about Jesus. If we want to understand that Jesus promises resurrection from the dead and eternal life to all who believe in him, we should talk about Jesus. And if we want God’s people to be strengthened for good works so that they produce much fruit, we should talk about Jesus.

Now this doesn’t mean that we never talk about good works. Of course we do. And part of the reason for this is because Scripture still talks about them. Another part of the reason is that, in order to do good works, we actually have to know what they are. So the Law—that is, “The divine Word which tells us what we must do”—the Law still informs us what a good work is, but it does not give us the power to do them. And that’s key. The power comes from Jesus Christ through the Gospel, because the Gospel is the source of our life as Christians.

So we want to avoid the temptation of staking too much on the Law. It’s tempting, when we see Christians not performing the good works we are supposed to do, to just beat them over the head with the Law, saying, “Try harder! Try harder!” And then, when that ends up not working—because it never works—the next temptation is to turn the entire Bible into a moral instruction book that gives us tips and tricks for how to actually keep the Law. If we can’t do it by trying harder, then there must be some tricks hidden somewhere in the Bible to help us out. This usually results in turning the Old Testament into a bunch of moral stories. But part of the problem with that is that most of the people in the Old Testament—even the good ones—were fairly immoral people, even by today’s standards. The bigger problem, though, is that we miss the big picture of what God was doing in the story. And then—another smaller problem—we also find that these tips and tricks we squeeze out of the text just don’t work. They don’t change our nature. They don’t make us less sinful. And they don’t really give us any extra motivation.

So then, sometimes, after everything fails, and we realize that the Law does not make us better people, we completely despair of the Law and just throw it out completely. This is really bad, because the Law is good. After all, the Law is the Word of God. It is the revelation of God’s

will for how he wants his creation to function. So the Law is good, and we should cherish it. But we should not expect it to do something it's not designed to do.

The Law is like a road map. It imparts information. A map tells you how to get from point A to point B. But it doesn't give you any special power to get there. If your car is broken down or out of gas, the map can't help you with that. So it would be silly to expect the map to push your car the rest of the way. Maps don't do that. It would also be silly to get mad at the map and throw it away. The map's not the problem.

And the Law tells us what we should do in order to be doing the will of God. The Ten Commandments, for example, give some really helpful information on what a good work is, but they don't actually give us the power to do those good works. We should not expect the Law to do something it's not intended to do. And we should not get mad at the Law when it doesn't do this thing that it's not even intended to do.

God's Law is good, and God gave it to us for a reason. So we need to rightly understand the nature of God's Law and the place it has in the life of a Christian. One of the things the Law does is convict us of our sins. Even for Christians, the Law continues to do this. It shows us where we have gone wrong, and it works sorrow or contrition in our hearts. But it does not bring us forgiveness and peace. Only the Gospel of Jesus Christ does that.

Another thing the Law does is inform us what good works God desires us to do. Maybe someone doesn't know that God wants all children everywhere to honor and obey their parents. So the Law imparts that information. Maybe someone isn't really convinced that God actually wants husbands and wives to be faithful to their marriage vows and for all people to live chaste and pure lives. We obviously have competing voices in the world, trying to persuade us otherwise, so the Law drives home the point that, yes, God is serious about this. Or maybe someone needs a gentle reminder that gossip is out of place. The Law is very good for giving that reminder. The Law is very useful for imparting information, and we should cherish this information.

But as far as granting power for good works, the Law is quite limited. All it can do is make threats of punishment. And that's important. If the threat of punishment convinces you not to murder a person, that is a very good thing. But the Law does not grant any positive power for good works. The Law does not change a person, and it does not give us joy in serving God and neighbor. That only comes from Jesus Christ through the Gospel.

The image Jesus gives is that of a vine and branches. You never see a branch lying on the ground, separated from the tree, but still growing fruit. If a branch is lying on the ground, it is necessarily dead. Even if it just fell off the tree and still has green leaves and some fruit on it, we soon consider it dead because it cannot produce leaves or fruit anymore. The branch will wither and become obviously dead. That's because the branch is separated from its source of life.

You and I, as disciples of Jesus Christ, are the same way; we have no life in ourselves. We are branches.

So how does a branch remain alive? Simply by remaining attached to the tree or the vine. Jesus, "the true vine" (15:1), gives us life. We live in him, and apart from him we die.

And how does a branch bear fruit? This is really the point of the branch. The purpose of the vine and its branches is to grow grapes. The vine does not support the branches just so they can

hang out and enjoy being connected to the vine, though I think the branches, if you could ask them, would say that they do enjoy it. But the purpose of the branch is to grow grapes. The purpose is to bear fruit.

So how does the branch bear fruit? Does the branch try really hard? Does the branch just push really hard until some grapes pop out? No. The branch bears fruit when it receives nutrients from the vine in order to make the fruit grow. So for Christians, the actual source of our good works is Jesus Christ. That's why he simply tells us to abide in him.

"Abide" is kind of a funny word. We don't really use it that much anymore, so we should try to explain it, especially since abiding results in us staying alive and bearing fruit. "Remain" is a more common word, but what Jesus is talking about is much stronger than the concept of remaining. It's more like "living" or "dwelling." The idea is that we live in Christ like you live in your home, or maybe even, like you live in your body. We exist in him, and we remain in him. We don't leave, for to leave would be death to us. And we cling to and cherish everything we receive from him. We abide like a branch abides in the vine. The branch is connected to the vine, and remains in the vine, and receives life giving nutrients from the vine. The branch is so connected to the vine that it is actually a part of the vine. If you take a step back from a vine to look at the whole thing, you say, "That's a vine." You don't have to say, "That's a vine and its branches," because the branches are technically part of the vine. And as long as the branch is a part of the vine, it lives and bears fruit. But if the branch falls off, it dies and no longer bears any fruit. So we abide in Jesus.

And the tools God has given us for this are his Word and Sacraments. Through Baptism the Holy Spirit makes us alive in Christ. He attaches us to this vine. And through the Word and through the Lord's Supper, he continually brings Christ and his gifts to us. It is these gifts of forgiveness, life, and the promise of everlasting salvation that strengthen and preserve our faith so that we may endure the trials of this life and bear fruit for God.

So the active part of our abiding—and there is an active part of it, because we are alive in Jesus Christ, and Jesus commands us to abide in him—the active part of our abiding expresses itself in faithfulness to the means of grace. That's Lutheran talk for the Word of God and the Lord's Supper. We abide in Christ and receive from him when we value preaching, Bible study, and the reading of Scripture in our homes. And then we receive Jesus' actual body and blood into our bodies when we faithfully receive the Lord's Supper. That's what it means for a Christian to abide in Christ. When we make faithful use of the Word and Sacraments, Jesus Christ, the true vine, feeds us with life-sustaining nutrients.

And there's also a gardener. In Jesus' analogy this is God the Father. And the gardener prunes the branches. That is, the gardener actually cuts off certain parts of the branch in order to make it more fruitful. To the amateur gardener—and I would consider myself an amateur if I actually did any gardening—to the amateur gardener, this seems counter-intuitive. You help the plant grow by cutting off parts of it. And I suppose if you don't know what you're doing—if you cut off the wrong parts, or if you prune it at the wrong time—you can really hurt the plant. But a good gardener knows what to cut and when to cut it. And God the Father is a good gardener.

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This pruning is a picture of discipline and trials in our lives. God uses certain things in our lives—things that don't feel good—to build character, so that we might produce more fruit.

And I want to be a little bit careful with this, because we never want to say that God causes bad things to happen. Remember that sin and death are evil. Sin and death were not part of God's good creation, and he is not pleased with them. So God does not cause you to be tempted, but he might use that temptation to prune you. And God certainly does not cause a person to get sick or to die. Death is evil, and God is not pleased with it. But he can and does use these awful experiences to bring about something good in us. And we don't have to say that the good thing outweighs the evil thing. Sometimes the evil thing is more evil than the good thing is good. When someone dies a tragic death, we have freedom to call it evil and just leave it at that. A Christian simply calls a thing what it is. If it is evil, we call it "evil." And if it is good, we call it "good." We don't have to spin evil things like death to fit into some greater good. Death does not fit into the greater good. The greater good is Jesus' own death and resurrection for us, which overcomes our sin and death. So our sin and death do not contribute to the greater good; the greater good overcomes our sin and death. We don't have to vindicate God for allowing certain things to happen. We can call evil, "evil." We can call good, "good." And we can trust God to work for good in our lives now, even in the midst of evil, and to grant us all good things on the Last Day.

For now Christ simply calls us to abide in him. Every good thing comes from him. Any good fruit we produce is because of our connection to the vine. So he calls us not to focus on the fruit. If we focus on the fruit we may become proud and self-righteous. And if we focus on the need for more fruit we may become weighed down by guilt and despair. He simply calls us to abide. So we abide in Christ. We live in the resurrected life of our Savior. For he has already died. He has already made payment for our sins. Whether it's disobedience to parents, unchastity, gossip, murder, or anything else, Jesus has made payment for those sins. And now he lives. He lives and reigns now and forevermore. He is our eternal source of life. So we live in him now, and on the Last Day we will be raised in him. Amen.

Now may the peace of God, which passes all understanding, guard your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus (Phil. 4:7). Amen.