

5th Sunday in Easter – Year B – May 6, 2012 – Faith Lutheran, Radcliff, KY

Based on John 15:1-8 written by Pastor Paul Horn

“Remain in the Vine and you will bear much fruit”

Of all the “I am” statements, what’s your favorite? “I am speed,” for you Lightning McQueen fans. “I am the greatest,” for all you boxing fans. For you history buffs, who said this, “I am sometimes a fox and sometimes a lion. The whole secret of government lies in knowing when to be the one or the other.” Napoleon. Or how about, “I think, therefore I am,” French philosopher Rene Descartes.

Did you know that the God from all eternity had his own “I am” statements? “I am that I am,” he proclaimed to Moses from the burning bush. Seven times Jesus began a self-description with “I am,” and they are all found in this book of John. **“I am the bread of life. I am the light of the world. I am the gate. I am the resurrection and the life. I am the way, the truth and the life.”** Last week we heard Jesus say, **“I am the Good Shepherd.”** Today we focus on Jesus’ **“I am the vine”** statement. Our Savior uses the picture of a grape vine and its branches and the close connection that they share. He explains to us the work of the gardener, who sometimes has to prune the branches, and sometimes he has to cut a branch off of the vine. Today we will learn that when we remain in the vine, we will bear much fruit.

I don’t know about you, but I really enjoy the story of Lydia from our First Lesson this morning. The apostle Paul travels to the town of Philippi, which is in Greece. There he meets a group of women who gather at the river for prayer. He conducts a women’s Bible study. And through the power of God’s Word, the Lord opens the heart of a businesswoman named Lydia. What a wonderful example of how the Word of God works. His Word opens the hearts of those who are dead in unbelief and makes them alive! His Word creates saving faith. And then good works follow. The branch bears fruit. Lydia puts her faith into action. She opens her home to the apostles. We see this in new Christians. They are excited about the Word. They have experienced the power of Christ’s death and resurrection in their new life in Christ. They have a new attitude about life and about service. They look for ways to serve. They invite others to hear about Jesus.

This is the affect the vine has on the branch. Sap flows through the vine. In that sap are the necessary nutrients that travel to the branches, making them healthy and strong so that they produce fruit. In the same way Christians are the branches that are connected to the vine, Christ Jesus. Christians draw energy from their fellowship with the Savior. The sap that flows from the vine to the branches is the Word of God. When you go home today read Psalm 1. There you will see that the author describes the man of God who studies God’s Word. He is like a tree that is planted next to a stream. He grows and is strong. His branches bear fruit. Whatever he does prospers.

It is the Word of God that flows through the Vine into us, the branches. Specifically that Word is the Gospel – the good news of what Jesus has accomplished for us. That good news is found in the Bible and the Sacraments - Baptism and Lord’s Supper. In the gospel God makes promises, he gives gifts, he gives blessings, he asks nothing of us, he says, “Just believe!”

As branches we stay connected to the gospel through our own Bible study at home, when we gather with other believers to study God's Word, when we gather together around the Word and Sacraments in worship. When we, the branches, remain connected to the vine, then we will bear fruit. That fruit are the good works we do for our God by serving each other. As branches who are connected to the Vine we want to do good works. It's our way of saying thanks to the Vine who gave us new life and who preserves our life.

If you go to Lowe's or Orscheln's today to buy some greenery to spruce your landscaping, the plants will come with care instructions so that you don't kill your plant. We also have a warning from the master gardener today. Jesus tells us, **"My Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit."** If a branch isn't bearing fruit, the gardener will cut it off, throw it out, and use it for the fire pit. These were branches that were in Christ, they were connected to the Vine, but they refused to receive the necessary sap that flows from the Vine to the branch. These branches starved themselves to death.

Have I done this at times? Do I allow myself to dehydrate spiritually? Have I unhooked the IV of Jesus' life giving Word and Sacraments – by being neglectful of the opportunities to gather with other branches in worship, Bible study? Have I been unfaithful in allowing Christ to connect to me through my personal study of his Word at home? Do I miss out on the beneficial sap that he seeks to give me to strengthen my soul?

The evidence is in the fruit I bear, or lack of it. In his letter to the Galatians the Apostle Paul lists the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. (Gal 5.22-24) These are the fruits God expects to see in us because we're connected to the vine. When you do not allow the vine to feed you, then the love Christ has for you will not flow to others. Then I do not always show love to my children, to my spouse, to my coworkers, to my church family members. The fruit of the Spirit is patience. But if I've disconnected myself from the vine then it shows. I am not quick to listen and slow to speak but rather very quick to be angry and quick to lash out at others. The fruit of the Spirit is self-control. But when disconnected from the Vine the fruit is shown to be rotten. Do you practice self-control with your tongue on the golf course after hitting an errant tee shot? Do you practice self-control with the money God has blessed you with or does every trip to Target turn into a free for all shopping spree? Do you practice self-control with alcohol or does every weekend turn into Derby weekend?

These dead branches that I produce get in the way of producing good, healthy fruit. The warning from Jesus is that if I do not remain in him, I will dry up and dehydrate until I am spiritually dead and the master gardener will cut me off forever and throw me into the fire to burn.

Are you thirsty? Are you spiritually dehydrated? Jesus comes with the gentle touch of a gardener tending his vineyard and pours refreshing water into your souls when he says, **"I am the true vine and my Father is the gardener. Every branch that does bear fruit he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful."** (vs1-2) We all have dead shoots on our branches that the gardener needs to prune – the attitudes of our sinful nature. Interestingly enough the Greek word for *pruning* is the same word for *cleansing*. Jesus says to us, **"You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you."** (vs3) The gardener prunes the branches to make them clean. And it all goes back to our connection with the Vine. From the Vine flows to the branch the Means of Grace: the gospel in Word and Sacrament – the gospel makes you clean.

These candle stands on our altar give us a beautiful visual reminder that Jesus is the Vine. And their location in the chancel reminds us that the Vine flows spiritual sap to us through the altar, the font and the pulpit. When we approach his table and receive in this meal his true body and blood with bread and wine he flows to our souls necessary nutrients: the promise that my sins of neglecting his Word and Sacraments have been forgiven. How refreshing! When we gather for worship the Vine flows to us the necessary “bread of life” that we need to fill our hungry souls. The bread is his Word proclaimed from this pulpit, and in his Word we heard him say to us today, **“This then is how we know that we belong to the truth, and how we set our hearts at rest in his presence. Whenever our hearts condemn us, God is greater than our hearts, and he knows everything.”** (Second Lesson from 1John 3:19-20) Our hearts condemn us when we see that we have not produced the fruits of the Spirit. God sets our hearts at rest. He cleanses our conscience by pointing us to his Son, Jesus, the Vine, who was perfectly patient with all, who practiced perfect self-control at all times, who loved all people perfectly – this life of love flows from the Vine to you. You are a branch that has been cleansed by Christ’s perfect life of love. The Vine flows to you the “resurrection and the life” through the waters of baptism. Baptized into Christ your hearts have been cleansed from sin and death. Baptized into the Vine he flows to you a resurrection of the dead and the sure confidence of life eternal in heaven.

“Remain in me, and I will remain in you, and you will bear much fruit,” this is his promise to you. The more you stay connected to the Vine through faithful worship and daily study of God’s Word in your home, you will find that you will look forward to it, and it make it a priority, and you’ll grow in your understanding of his Word, and you will find joy in your relationship with God’s Word. Hook up the spiritual IV of God’s Word and Sacraments and you will never wonder where you will get the strength to live as a branch for Christ. Connected to the Vine you will find that you have the ability to bear the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness, and self-control – in abundance. You will find comfort and hope in this world. You will live with the confidence of life in heaven after death. **“Remain in me, and I will remain in you, and you will bear much fruit.”**

Jesus even promises, **“If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you.”** (vs7) So... “Jesus, I wish that you will make my horse win, place or show in the Derby, Preakness and Belmont.” No. In chapter 14 Jesus said, **“Ask for anything in my name and I will do it.”** It’s not just mentioning his name in prayer, but praying for all the things that are associated with his name. Prayer that is aimed at carrying forward the work of Jesus. Remain in the Vine and he will answer your prayer for more understanding, for wisdom, for the ability to be patient, to be faithful, to be forgiving, to be quick to listen and slow to speak, to bear all this fruit with love. **“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”** (vs8)

Today, and every day you come to this place, look at the candle stands, and remember why God wants you here. This is where the Vine feeds the branches. Today, and every day you sit down with your cup of tea or coffee and open your Bible, remember that this is where the Vine feeds the branches. And wherever the Vine feeds the branch, the branch remains in the Vine and the branch will bear abundant fruit. Amen.