

John 15:1 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² 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. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ 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.

⁵ "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. ⁶ 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. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be given you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

Fellow Friends of Jesus,

REMAINING IN JESUS

Remaining in Jesus Is the Only Way to Life

If, today, you were to meet your best friend from gradeschool, what would you say? Now some of you are still in gradeschool, I realize. But for those who have been out for decades, and probably haven't seen that gradeschool friend for decades, what would you say? You would catch up for a while, and then the conversation would become awkward. While you saw that friend every single day for years, it has probably been decades since you saw them. When we friends for life last saw each other back then we did not understand what that good bye would mean.

Do you remember the days of Lent, a few weeks ago. Now, in the glow of Easter, it is hard to go back to that gloom. But think back to Maundy Thursday and Good Friday. When Jesus likened himself to a vine and his disciples to branches, it was Maundy Thursday. Jesus was preparing to leave them. In just a matter of hours their rabbi-disciple relationship would end. Would they just drift apart, conversing less and less over the months and years? Would their memories of each other fade?

Unlike all the good-byes you and I have experienced, Jesus' good-bye to them was different. ***"Remain in me, and I will remain in you."*** (4). "Stay close!" says Jesus. "Write, call, text, post it! Keep in touch. I will keep in touch with you."

Jesus' word to each believer is, "Stay in touch!" Or in the words of our text, ***"Remain in me, and I will remain in you."*** How? He is in heaven, we on earth. Verse 7 tells us the key to remaining in Jesus. ***"If you remain in me and my words remain in you."***

Since I was brought to baptism in my first days, Jesus has been close to me. He has been there in my heart. Or to compare it to modern communication: he carries his phone at all times, ready anytime I want to call. The ringer is set on maximum. He always picks up no matter what he is doing. Jesus remains in me with absolute faithfulness. In the Gospel of Matthew, do you remember Jesus' last words to his disciples? His last words were, ***"Surely I am with you always to the very end of the age."*** (Mt 28:20). Jesus has promised to remain with us.

"Remain in me, and I will remain in you." Those words bring up a problem. For while Jesus is absolutely faithful, I have not been. While Jesus may always be willing to accept my call, at many times I saw the name of the caller, Jesus, and said, "I don't have time for more advice from him." Every single time I heard God tell me what he wanted me to do, but I didn't, I distanced myself from Jesus. I could look at all ten commandments, commandments about worshiping God, honoring God's

name, loving my neighbor, speaking well of other people—I can look at all those commands and realize that I have not always been faithful. I have not remained with him. And every single one of those sins is a valid cause for Jesus to walk out on our relationship. With every sin I have cheated on Jesus. I failed to remain in him.

That is a dangerous place to be. For Jesus himself warned his disciples, ***“I am the vine; you are the branches... 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”*** (5-6). Yes, it is possible for people to be close to Jesus and then fall away. It is possible to be a green and thriving branch which dries up. The grape farmer will come along and cut off that branch. The only thing to do with a branch like that is throw it in the fire.

When we realize that, in truth, we have not remained in Jesus, it is time to turn back to him. We might have reason to be too afraid or ashamed to return to some human relationships. But with Jesus not so. Remember this good news from 2 Timothy 2:13 *“If we are faithless, he is faithful, for he cannot disown himself.”*

Practical Ways of Remaining In Jesus

If Jesus is so faithful and loving. And if Jesus tells us that we need a living relationship with him, how do we remain in Jesus?

The first thing I want to say to each and every one of you who have gathered here this morning is this: I am so very glad that you are here in Jesus’ house. You have come to worship your God and your Savior. You are remaining in Jesus. Here we turn to him, confessing our sins and hearing his forgiveness. Here we hear the good news and also how to stay close to him. In moments we will together receive Holy Communion. By coming to Sunday worship, you do just about the most important thing you can to strengthen your faith. Keep it up!

This, right here, right now, is a great beginning. But to really remain in Jesus, there is much more. Many people worship God on Sunday at church, but then don’t think much of him the rest of the week. That is a relationship which is good, but not doing much more than holding its ground.

Jesus is the vine; we are little branches. What are some things you can do to grow in Jesus, to become strong branches? Pray before and after meals. It’s a really small thing, but that is one of those little places that you stay in touch with Jesus. Have daily prayers whether in the morning or evening or both. Another idea: Regularly read your Bible or devotional reading.

Let me just make a plug here. I think it is very important to have that in your faith-life—daily devotions or Bible readings. Start the habit now. We have new *Meditations* devotion books in the rack just outside the worship area. Those are daily 2 minute devotions. Just two minutes! Or try a book of short devotions like the one our family is currently enjoying by Herman Gockel, *My Hand in His*. You can find books like these online for a penny plus \$4 shipping. Or look on the WELS homepage under “Spiritual Help” and click on “Today’s Devotion.” They have new devotions every weekday. You can read it, or listen to it like a podcast.

Do I sound like a salesman? Maybe I am, I don’t know. But I do know this. Jesus, four times in four different ways, says to us in our reading, ***“Remain in me, and I will remain in you.”*** And I want nothing more than I want this for you—that you remain in Jesus, and that he remains in you.

Bearing Good Fruit

To a gardener, just about the most beautiful thing in the world is ripening fruit. Watch the tomatoes grow in size, then change colors from green to yellow, then orange and finally red. The gardener goes out to check almost every day, waiting for the day when he can finally pick that fruit. Or maybe it is watching the ears of sweet corn appear at the sides of the stalk. When the silk starts to dry out you

know the first sweet corn is almost here.

Jesus was talking to people well acquainted with these sorts of things. They had no supermarkets, refrigeration or semi-trucks to bring in the Florida produce. People in the 1st century, even in a city like Jerusalem, knew very well where their food came from. The Jews actually had two harvest festivals. To such people Jesus said, ***“I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.”***

But what am I to make of me bearing fruit? Carrots from the fingertips? Raspberries dangling from the hair? What is this fruit? Perhaps the best known verse about this fruit is from Galatians chapter 5, *“The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.”* (22-23). Finding fruits of the Spirit in a person are like finding fruit on a grapevine or vegetables in the garden. What joy!

What joy to find a person who is loving and joyful, or peaceful and patient, or faithful and gentle. The fruit that a Christian bears is a refreshing and healthy change in this world! How we enjoy being in the presence of such people. When those traits are found in a Christian, we can be sure that Christian is a branch connected to the true vine Jesus.

Remain in Jesus and be fruitful. He said, ***“This is to my Father’s glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.”***

Who Can Bear Good Fruit

There is one thing we must consider here at the end. Who can bear good fruit? Some of the biggest charitable foundations in the world are run by people who have no faith or interest in Jesus. Are their works of service and charity good works?

Sometimes non-Christians act better than many Christians. I think of a Christian man in a country with many Christians and many Muslims. (Now I am not talking about Zambia or Malawi here.) His advice for exchanging money in his country was this: “You can never trust the Christians with money. Always go to a Muslim.” Do non-Christians do good works?

In Catechism class, the students have to learn this definition: “A good work is everything a Christian does, according to God’s will, out of thankfulness to God.”

To say that none but a Christian can do a God-pleasing work sounds like a Christian with a superiority complex. But listen closely to what Jesus says: ***“No branch can bear fruit by itself... Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.... apart from me you can do nothing.”*** Jesus lays so much stress on this that it almost embarrasses me. There are some non-Christians who do some very wonderful things. But Jesus says that all of their works are worthless. On the one hand the Lutheran Church has always acknowledged that we should be thankful for unbelievers who live decently. But it has also always maintained just what Jesus said here, that only people who know Jesus as their Savior can do things that are pleasing to God.

Are all their works worthless? In our house we have a rule about breakfast cereal. You can’t have sweet cereal (Lucky Charms) until you have had a non-sweet cereal (Cheerios). It’s just the rule. If I can make the comparison, that is how God judges good works. He says, “Before I count anything you do as a ‘good work’, you must believe in Jesus as the Savior from your sins.” ***“Apart from me you can do nothing.”***

As so while we thank God for all the good things non-Christians do. We also realize that they do not have the most important thing in the world – a relationship with their Savior Jesus Christ. Which makes us yearn to bring Jesus to them.

Though we do not physically see Jesus, he has given us his Word, the Bible, that he may remain in us. Let us daily remain in him. And as we remain in him and he in us, we will be surprised by how easy it is to bear abundant fruit, good works, to God’s glory. Amen.