**John 15:1-6,16-17** March 7, 2018

Pastor P. Martin **Faith Lutheran Church, Radcliff, KY** Mid-week Lent #2

 *John 15:1[Jesus said,] “I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. 2He 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. 3You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. 4Remain 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. 5I 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. 6If 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…*

 *16“You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you to go and bear fruit—fruit that will last… 17This is my command: Love each other.”*

Dear Friends in Christ,

 Have you ever been in a vineyard? As a child, we had a large grapevine—not a vineyard, a grapevine—at the far end of our garden. In the heat of summer we sometimes took refuge under the shade of the abundant grape leaves. Our sprawling grapevine was better than a tree because the leaves of our grapevine covered us on all sides. Sitting in our hideout in the grapevine, Mom couldn’t see us (at least we thought she couldn’t) even though there was a clear line of sight from her kitchen window to the grapevine.

 So when I went to a real vineyard for the first time, I was shocked. Have you ever been to a vineyard? Maybe a couple of you have done a vineyard tour, so you know what I am talking about. Out in a real vineyard the vines are not allowed to sprawl. Every year the vine dresser cuts off the entire year’s growth; just cuts it back to stumps. It looks like the guy killed the vines. You see hundreds of stumps maybe four feet tall with two, three, four branches. These few remaining branches, too, have been completely trimmed back. They look dead. The first time I saw a real vineyard out in California’s Napa Valley, I thought it was the ugliest thing I had ever seen! But *those* grapevines were really fulfilling their purpose. When taken care of, pruned, in that way, grapevines give the best fruit and the most fruit.

 This evening’s portion of Jesus’ upper room teachings is his core teaching. All the rest of the upper room teachings in John chapters 13-17 are built around this reading, like a bull’s eye. The central truth of Jesus’ most important teaching session is this: ***“I am the true vine.”***

 So let’s take a walk into the vineyard. Leave the cell phones, get out from behind the computer, come out into the real world. Feel life! Look up at the bright sun. Take off your shoes, and feel and smell the moist earth as life begins to shoot through the vines. Look at the bright green leaves just beginning to prove that the dead stumps are actually very much alive. Watch life happen, and realize what Jesus wants us to be.

**I. Look at How the Branches Need the Vine!**

 Jesus is the ***“true vine”***. That’s what he calls himself—the true vine. One amazing thing is how many people think of Jesus as just one of many vines. I don’t understand how anyone can think that—unless, of course, they really haven’t read what Jesus said. Jesus always spoke about himself exclusively. Jesus allowed none beside him as Savior.

 He also allowed none to think of themselves as their own Savior. He would let no one think they could stand before their Maker at end of life with a gunny-sack (or a briefcase) full of good deeds and pour them out on the judge’s bench and say, “See here, your honor! Look at all these good things I have done. Surely that is reason enough to let me into eternity.” Jesus, even for his own disciples says, ***“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.”*** They were “clean” not because of what they did or the fruit they bore, but through the truth Jesus had spoken into their hearts.

 Fruit-bearing grape branches don’t appear out of thin air, nor even out of bare ground. They must be attached to a vine. Our spiritual life begins when we are attached to Jesus.

 We might compare this to our own life. A child does not choose to be born. A child is brought into this world apart from his own will. And that is the truth about becoming Christ’s. We do not choose to be Christ’s. The Holy Spirit gives birth to faith in our hearts by connecting us to Jesus. Believers, like grape branches, do not come into being on their own. Someone else must give them birth.

 But here the similarity with children ends. Children grow up and eventually have their own life. That is, in fact, what parents hope for, what they spend themselves for: that the child will one day have their own life. *That* is nothing like the branch of a grapevine. A fruit-bearing branch never grows up to have a life of its own. It *always* has to be connected to the vine.

 Jesus said, ***“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. 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.”*** As Christians, we will always need Jesus. Always. Even as we cannot *become* Christians apart from Jesus, we cannot *live like* Christians without being attached to Jesus. Jesus stresses that! He says that the moment a branch is detached from the vine, it dies! In fact, you may as well write on it, “Destined for destruction”! Jesus says this with no animosity, but as a simple statement of fact. Our loving Savior preaches a damnation for those who do not want him. He loves people enough to warn them. That is why we check up on people who don’t come to church. We can’t judge hearts, but we do get worried when people’s relationships with Christ seem to be cooling. It can be dangerous. Jesus says it can be deadly!

 But Jesus says that for those who remain in him, something will happen.

**II. Look at What Branches on a Vine Do!**

 Let me give you a scenario that you might see in a house with kids, or might have seen if you used to have kids. So one of your children surprises you one cold Saturday morning and makes you a cup of hot chocolate. And you ask, “Why?” “’Cuz.” “What do you mean, ‘’Cuz’?” “Just ’cuz.” And you know the reason is too tender to be spoken aloud: some things are more true when they are not spoken, and it gets you a little choked up.

 Another time, another cup of hot chocolate magically appears. Again you ask, “Why?” This time the answer is different. “Well, I know that you said I can’t use the car this month because of what happened last time, but maybe tonight?”

 So which cup of hot chocolate do you appreciate more? The one freely given, or the one given to get something?

 Why do you bear fruit for Jesus? Do you try to bear fruit for Jesus so that Jesus will give you something—so that you can use the car? Or do you bear fruit for Jesus “Just ’cuz”?

 Jesus wants it to be “Just ’cuz.”

 Because if we act nice just so that we can get something from God, it is not enough, and our consciences will tell us so. It could have happened to somebody like Simon Peter who denied Jesus, to somebody like the Apostle Paul who had a terrible past, to an adulterer and murderer like David, to a deceiver like Jacob, to a liar like Abraham, that if they had to get enough cups of hot chocolate for God, that they would eventually realize they could never do it.

 Just in case Jesus’ disciples were ever worried about having done enough for God, Jesus wanted them to remember, ***“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken.”*** You are already saved**.**

 Why do branches bear grapes? ***“If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit.”*** Because they are attached to the vine. Because they already have life. Who ever heard of a branch bearing fruit so that it could attached to a vine? It is an impossibility. Branches don’t bear fruit in order to get life. They bear fruit because they already have life!

 Christ’s people don’t do good works to get into heaven. We do good works because we already have eternal life. In the most amazing display of love ever, our God took on flesh for each of us, for every single thought word and deed that did not meet God’s sterling standard of perfection, and he died to forgive them. And now he tells us that ALL is forgiven. When we come to understand and trust that truth, we cannot do anything except what grape branches attached to a vine do: bear fruit.

**Conclusion**

 It is a hot sunny summer day: 95 in the shade, almost no humidity. You can feel yourself dehydrating by the minute. In your bare feet, you walk over to a vine, pull aside a few leaves and look at a two-pound bunch of sweet, juicy grapes. Pluck one off, step into the shade, look around, marvel at Christ the true vine. Look at the life he gives to the people around you. Enjoy the fruit that each of us bears, different from person to person, to be sure. Some with their encouragement, some with their tireless service, some with their generosity, some with their knowledge, some with plain good-natured kindness, and rejoice that though imperfectly, you sit in the midst of fruity people, connected to Christ, the true vine. Amen.