



The Fifth Sunday of Easter May 2, 2021

“Branches”

Pastor Kirk Kerns

“Just as the branch cannot bear fruit by itself unless it abides in the vine,
neither can you unless you abide in me.”
(John 15:4b)

Let us pray: Eternal God, your Son cried out in anguish from the cross, and you delivered him. Do not hide your face from those who cry out to you. By his death and resurrection bring life where there is death: feed the hungry, strengthen the weak, and break the chains of oppression, that all people may rejoice in your saving deeds through Jesus Christ our Savior and Lord. Amen.

It’s that time of the year when we see new growth in our flowerbeds and coming out in our trees. The leaves are pushing out from our Pin Oak trees out front and that means a fresh set of pollen. We clean up from the winter around the house and we begin planning our gardens whether a vegetable garden or flower gardens. I remember helping my grandfather dig his garden when he was unable to do so anymore. The reward was the fresh vegetables and especially

those wonderful tomatoes and spring onions and cucumbers and all the rest. It takes work to continue to weed and keep things moving forward and sometimes that is hard work.

Sometimes all it takes is to drop a few seeds in the ground and out comes the bounty. Sometimes it takes extra work to prepare the soil so that the plants will grow. All in all the bottom line is that the growth comes because of a good planting and good root systems and good amount of water and sunshine. Most of you are aware that our backyard borders Strite's Orchard and I can look out over the apple trees that are growing behind us and it is a field of blossoms on the trees right now. It is a beautiful site to see and sometime in the fall of the year they will be around to pick the apples. It is a cycle of beginning to growing to picking. Without those flowers there will be no apples.

These are the images which come to mind for me today as I hear once again the words in our gospel from St. John, "I am the vine, you are the branches." At the core of growing anything there is a vine or a stalk or a shoot that supports the growth of a plant. We know the core of who we are from the truth of Jesus' words for us today, that when the branch becomes disconnected it "withers" and finds it's only worth now as firewood.

This passage has come around at least two other times since I have been called as your pastor. I always feel the pressure that I have to preach on what is right above me on the wall. But the reality is that it fits us and those words point us to whom we are as the people of God in this place. Like the good shepherd of last week's text, this week's image of the vine is another extended metaphor, which also borrows from and adapts Old Testament imagery.

When we read a Biblical story, we can get a picture in our minds to see it and sometimes to see the scene play out. With this passage we don't really need to see it in that way when it is right here on the wall. So a question to ask is what does it mean to you to be a branch that is supported by the vine?

Our passage begins today with the vine and the vine-grower God. In our gospel it is God who tends the Son-vine, pruning the branches for abundant fruitfulness. Grapevines do need pruning; grapes need sun but not too much. So in this image the Father does that precious tending for the perfect balance of light and shade. The overwhelming thrust of the passage is fruitfulness. The words bear fruit appear six times in these eight verses. Fruit-bearing is not something that the branches do by force or will. The fruit happens organically because the vine is true and the gardener good. But the branches of this passage do choose to abide in the vine grower who is identified as Jesus by Jesus himself.

Being connected to the vine can be hard work at times. The passage talks about pruning to make the vine bear more fruit. I see this image in my Pin Oak trees that through the winter and into the spring seem to prune themselves. I am still picking up dead pieces of branches some tiny and some bigger. The Pin Oak trees seem to prune themselves of the dead growth and drop it to the ground below. Then I look up and see all of the leaves now forming and the trees are turning green and new life is growing. The vine-grower “removes every branch in me that bears no fruit.”

Jesus is the vine and we are already and always the branches. How do we grow? How do we branch out? We didn't make the branch metaphor up but we are indeed integrated into the vine because of the vine-grower. There is something very passive about the branch. And yet in all that passivity, branches do what they were made to do: They receive life and they give it. And then they do it again and again and again. One has to wonder how a branch would disconnect from the vine if it even could do so. The metaphor seems to break down here since we are not branches, not really.

Unlike a branch, we sometimes have a tendency to think we are smarter than or more capable of knowing what's best for us and so we do cut ourselves off from the source of life itself. Not just once, perhaps many times over and over

again that we cut ourselves off from the vine which is the source of our lives.

Unlike the branch, from time to time we think we are called to bear a different sort of fruit than what we were meant to bear. Totally unlike the branch, we forget the gift and the power of the vine into which we were born, from which we were made, in the first place. Without which we are really nothing at all. Or at least not anything like what we were created to be and do.

So when we look up here on the wall and actually see a vine that is seemingly growing and a few grapes on the branches we are reminded that the vine-grower is our source of life. How do we take what we see and hear about the vine and the branches and keep it as central to who we are? Branches grow out from the vine and the vine grows to support us. The passage from the gospel of John points to abiding in the vine eight times. Do we really accept our role as the branches? There is a hurting world out there in front of us that needs to see and to feel the warmth of the branches. There is a hurting world out there that does not know the vine or the vine-grower. The passage seems to place the branches in a passive mode but the reality is that the branches need to grow so that the world knows God and God's Son, Jesus the Christ.

The painting on the wall is peaceful to look at and it gives a good feeling but we can see that the branches are growing down the wall to us. Today we are

reminded that we are not to be passive about our faith. Last week in the Kids' Word recording, I talked about how words alone don't get things done. I shared a statement from St. Francis of Assisi who said "Preach the gospel and if necessary use words." These words point us to being active branches and not passive ones. Again I ask, "What does it mean to be a branch?" Are we getting pruned from the vine or are we being tended as part of the vine?

Maybe we need to figure out for ourselves what it means to be a branch on the vine of the vine-grower. So with all of you today I am standing here seeking to receive the gift of Jesus' words for us now. Indeed, in doing this and only this, perhaps I can begin to come nearer to being who God intends me to be, bearing fruit I was made to bear. I am wondering what it is to abide, to stay near, and in so doing to even more fully receive the gift of life itself, meant for all of us the same, but uniquely each one as well.

I am anticipating the truth that in so doing, bearing fruit has been borne and will be borne in you and in me and in all of us together: no doubt a harvest even more abundant than all those tomatoes my grandfather would plant and harvest when they were ripe. When I was a kid around ten to twelve years of age, we lived on the West Side of Steelton. We lived in a turn of the century row house that was built for the new steelworkers coming to work at the new steel

plant. We had a small back yard that my mother had filled with wonderful flowers along each side. I decided to have a small garden so my dad helped me plan it out and I planted onions, and some leaf lettuce and I believe some green peppers. The jewel of the garden was the tomato plants that were planted next to the old outhouse that had become the garden tool shed over time. The tomato plants grew and grew and we kept tying them up as they grew and we had more tomatoes that we could ever use.

I would take them to the neighbors and give them away. There were so many and it got to the point where the neighbors didn't want to see me anymore. My mother was a very frugal person and she didn't want to see them go to waste so she made homemade tomato jelly. The tomato vines produced an enormous amount of fruit. The vines were in good soil next to the old outhouse and the branches produced so many tomatoes.

When we look up here and see the vine and the branches, we are reminded that we are pruned and cared for by the vine-grower to produce and that is what we are called to do. So I say to you, "Be the best branch you can be." May you know the truth of Jesus' words today in your own backyard, or in a nearby space, or yes, in the person you sit across from now: the gifts of abiding, of staying close, of receiving the gifts which are meant to be received, and of bearing the fruit

each one is meant to bear. We are all branches and we are fed by the vine and its roots. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Let us pray: Lord you are the vine-grower and we are the branches. Help us to be the branches you want so that we can reach out to those in our communities and around the world who need to know you, the true vine-grower. Amen.