

"Joined to Christ"

Text: John 15:1-8

God grant that every blood-bought soul hearing or reading these words this morning might learn to appreciate ever more fully just how blessed we are to know Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior. Amen.

Dear Fellow Servants – branches grafted into the Lord Jesus, who is our life:

What does the word "vinedresser" mean to you? Someone who takes care of grape vines, right? Pretty bland, innocuous word, isn't it? In fact if anything it conjures up rather quiet, peaceful images of men and women quietly tending to plants – good, healthy, honest work. Yet there is more to the word than that, isn't there. The word itself implies something ominous – a cold hard fact in a very imperfect world. The obvious implication is that vines need "dressing" or pruning. The "ominous" part is that pruning indicates failure and death. Not really a big deal, until you read our text for this morning.

Our text adds the ominous part the moment Jesus refers to God the Father as the vinedresser. The obvious implication suddenly becomes anything but bland or idyllic, because the implication no longer involves plants but human souls. God as vinedresser indicates falling away and apostasy; it forewarns of the loss of saving faith among Christians and the resulting catastrophe of eternal destruction in hell. Our text teaches us that the same hard lessons that apply to simple grapevines also apply to you and me. The source of our very lives is Jesus Christ. Separation from him is a death sentence. Scripture leaves us with zero doubt of this fact. What we also here learn is that our God desires more *for* us and *from* us than simple survival. He seeks also the fruits of our faith, and for that we need to be more than hanging by just a tattered thread. For that we need to be well connected. The text through which all of these truths are offered and reinforced to us this morning is found in the Gospel recorded through John, the Fifteenth Chapter:

^{ESV} **John 15:1-8** *"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.

These are the words of God. God forbid that we ever lose touch with the majesty, perfection, and vital significance of these words; or that we come to regard them as common or tiresome. Even so we pray, **"Sanctify us by Your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth!"** Amen.

Our text appears to be a unit designed by our Lord to combat what I have come to regard as the single greatest threat to Christians in our society today, which is apathy or indifference. The natural result of every instance of spiritual apathy is eventual separation from our Savior. Jesus clearly warns us through these words that there is only one way for us to survive in this world and to thereby enter into the next, and that is to stay connected to him. The alternative is (or ought to be) terrifying in the extreme.

It's no secret that winters can be tough here on the plains. One of the more discouraging discoveries for homeowners after a long hard winter is when they find that some starving critter has chewed a circle of bark from the base of one or several of their favorite backyard trees. The experienced eye recognizes that, without something known as a bridge graft, this is a death-sentence for the tree. The tree might even bud in the spring, but survival – in the absence of heroic measures – is impossible.

It is a tragedy of the highest order to see more and more Christians who are just like those pitiful, dying trees. We're not talking about the unbelievers now. We are talking about the children of God – Christians who are hanging by a thread and don't seem to know or care. Their *physical* life might well be full and good. Their health might be perfect and they appear happy and content. Yet they have all but doomed themselves and haven't the faintest idea that they are therefore in the very worst sort of danger imaginable.

Stop for a moment and ask yourself at this point if you are among them. Before you answer, it might be helpful to take a look at some of the warning signs. The key here is not to just stay connected. That is far too feeble. The doomed trees are also connected, even though they

have little or no chance of survival. The key is really to stay *well* connected – solidly and permanently connected to our Lord Jesus.

So how well connected are you to your Lord? Are your Savior and your faith your very life, or are they just *parts* of your life – and rather insignificant parts at that? Do you spend more time each week being pulled down by the evil that is all around you (and in you) or being built up through, Bible study, worship, Christian fellowship, and prayer? Is your faith growing or fading? Do you take your problems first to the Lord, or do you try to solve them by your own strength, wisdom, and cunning? Do you go to Bible Class when it is offered... ever? Are you growing more bold and more comfortable in talking to others about your faith, or are you pulling your bushel-basket down ever more tightly over your candle? Do you find yourself happy or disappointed when you have to miss church? Does it bother you like it once did to skip worship services on a Sunday morning in favor of some other pursuit? Have you filled your world with so many other things that you find sleep more important on Sunday than going to church?

These are hard questions to have to answer, and yet there are no questions more serious or more important. How easy and natural gradually to accept the lie that we can be independent operators and still survive. We would like to believe that we have at least some strength in and of ourselves, and yet the hard cold fact is that we lose all spiritual strength, all spiritual sustenance, all spiritual standing before God the instant we are cut off from our Lord Jesus and his Holy Spirit.

Do you, for example, believe that Jesus was exaggerating when he said in our text, **"Apart from me you can do nothing."**? Stop here again and give some thought to these words. Do you actually understand and believe what Jesus is saying here: **"Apart from me you can do nothing."**? It is important to define just what **"nothing"** means in God's eyes. It means that you can still be rich and successful. You can have a life surrounded by luxuries and toys. It means you can be popular, attractive, and well-regarded in society. All of this is as nothing to God, and his is the only opinion that counts on the Day of Judgment. Having **"nothing"** means you will be damned.

This is the first great lesson of our text for this morning. We would do well to take careful note of these words, for here Jesus himself spells out the dire consequences of separation from him: **"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."**

Imagine the horror of an eternity of torment compounded by the knowledge that you once had Eternal Life, and threw it away; that you once had saving faith, and sacrificed it for what on Judgment Day you will finally recognize as less than nothing. There is no second chance in eternity.

Yet, thanks be to God, not only is this only *half* of the message of our text, it is the harsh and disagreeable half. Necessary, but unpleasant. There is also a sweet, upbeat, positive side to these words of our Savior – a promise that ought to fill each of us with hope and confidence.

First of all, our Lord must have wanted to make certain that his words could not be misunderstood to mean what he never intended them to mean. So it was that in talking about bearing fruit only through our connection to him as the vine, Jesus wanted to make perfectly clear that such bearing of fruit is *not* what makes us holy and righteous in the sight of his Father in heaven; it is *not* the thing that pays our way into heaven. Did you notice in our text how he communicated that message? He did it when he said, **"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."** We are clean and righteous in God's sight because of Jesus Christ and the gospel of salvation. God has declared us "not guilty" - justified us - out of pure, undeserved love through the very faith that he through the Holy Spirit has created in our hearts. That faith is worked in the hearts of his disciples *through the word that he spoke* – the simple truth that God has punished his Son Jesus in our place. That purity that we now have is therefore a *gift*, it is *inherited*, for such spiritual cleanliness could never come through our own actions. So our Lord, at the very start of his discussion on bearing fruits to the glory of God, says plainly, **"Already you are clean because of the word that I have spoken to you."**

Although it is spiritually beneficial to use this text to ask the hard, critical questions of ourselves, we cheat ourselves greatly if we do not then examine this text for the invaluable comfort it offers. Not only are we assured here that we are already clean by virtue of the Spirit working through the Word, we are also given some other promises. To be separated from Jesus is to die, but when we remain in him we cannot help but to bear fruit. And not just a little. Bushels of the stuff. While it is certainly true that apart from Jesus we can do nothing, the converse is also true. With Jesus we *can* do great things. The power and the glory belong to Jesus alone, but the work has been given to us – prepared in advance by our God for you and me to carry out.

Our Lord goes on to give us some startling news: **"If you abide in me, and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you."** What powerful words and what an incredible promise. No one, save the child of God, has such authority, such a promise – and our Father's will is that we use these privileges well. Our text teaches us that this is so with these words, **"By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples."**

Our Lord here points out the rare and wonderful privilege of serving our Father in his kingdom, glorifying him with our lives, and being called his disciples. Since this is the will of our Father, then we can know that it is also the will of that new man that lives in every Christian. The strength to produce such a harvest of good works, however, simply can never be ours until and unless we are well connected to the only viable source of that strength, Jesus Christ. So he himself said in our text: **"Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing."**

We would all do well to keep these words in our back pockets and to haul them out every time we are faced with a decision on whether we will avail ourselves of the opportunity to be strengthened in that bond with our Lord Jesus or allow the bond to be weakened even more. The Lord's words here are the whip God has given us to use on that lazy, godless old Adam that unfailingly votes for apathy and slothfulness – that evil side of each of us that with perfect consistency promotes the devil's agenda in our lives. Yet here we also find the incomparable message of sins forgiven and our place in heaven prepared through our connection with Jesus Christ. So it will ever be with God's word – **"For we are the aroma of Christ to God among those who are being saved and among those who are perishing, ¹⁶ to one a fragrance from death to death, to the other a fragrance from life to life."** (2 Corinthians 2:15-16)

God grant to each of us a closer, more intimate walk with our Savior-God, that our God might be glorified in every conceivable way by everything we say and do. *Apart from* Jesus Christ we can do nothing at all. *With him* there is simply no limit to the harvest that can be his in us. Therefore we pray God the Holy Spirit to connect us ever more closely to our only source for strength and life, Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Acts 8:26-38** Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Rise and go toward the south to the road that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." This is a desert place. ²⁷ And he rose and went. And there was an Ethiopian, a eunuch, a court official of Candace, queen of the Ethiopians, who was in charge of all her treasure. He had come to Jerusalem to worship ²⁸ and was returning, seated in his chariot, and he was reading the prophet Isaiah. ²⁹ And the Spirit said to Philip, "Go over and join this chariot." ³⁰ So Philip ran to him and heard him reading Isaiah the prophet and asked, "Do you understand what you are reading?" ³¹ And he said, "How can I, unless someone guides me?" And he invited Philip to come up and sit with him. ³² Now the passage of the Scripture that he was reading was this: "Like a sheep he was led to the slaughter and like a lamb before its shearer is silent, so he opens not his mouth. ³³ In his humiliation justice was denied him. Who can describe his generation? For his life is taken away from the earth." ³⁴ And the eunuch said to Philip, "About whom, I ask you, does the prophet say this, about himself or about someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip opened his mouth, and beginning with this Scripture he told him the good news about Jesus. ³⁶ And as they were going along the road they came to some water, and the eunuch said, "See, here is water! What prevents me from being baptized?" ³⁷ ³⁸ And he commanded the chariot to stop, and they both went down into the water, Philip and the eunuch, and he baptized him.

ESV **1 John 4:1-11** Beloved, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, for many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² By this you know the Spirit of God: every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ and every spirit that does not confess Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you heard was coming and now is in the world already. ⁴ Little children, you are from God and have overcome them, for he who is in you is greater than he who is in the world. ⁵ They are from the world; therefore they speak from the world, and the world listens to them. ⁶ We are from God. Whoever knows God listens to us; whoever is not from God does not listen to us. By this we know the Spirit of truth and the spirit of error. ⁷ ¶ Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. ⁸ Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love. ⁹ In this the love of God was made manifest among us, that God sent his only Son into the world, so that we might live through him. ¹⁰ In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins. ¹¹ Beloved, if God so loved us, we also ought to love one another.

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The Fourth Sunday after Easter – May 3, 2015

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn - 197 (Red Hymnal)

"Where Wilt Thou Go Since Night Draws Near"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The First Lesson: (Acts 8:26-38) Following Christ's death and resurrection the fledgling Christian Church grew – at times by thousands converted through one sermon and at times one by one. We read in our first lesson how the gospel came to an Ethiopian official. From there God alone knows how or to whom the Christian faith spread. So also today you and I have no idea how many can be reached through a single sharing of the Word of God. What we do know is that no one is helped by our silence.

Psalm 51 (Supplement page 31) (Brown Hymnal)

The Second Lesson: (1 John 4:1-11) It would surprise no one to learn that the word that appears more often than any other in songs and poems is "love." While the world loves love, the world has no clear concept of the sort of love advocated by God through the Apostle John in our second reading this morning. Christian love is an action more than an attitude. It is placing the needs of others first, and then working tirelessly to supply those needs. The perfect standard for this love was, of course, Christ Jesus himself.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 342 (Red Hymnal)

"Chief of Sinners Though I Be"

The Sermon – Text: John 15:1-8 (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

"Joined to Christ"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn -411 (Verses 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"From Eternity, O God"

The Offering

The Prayer followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn -544 (Verses 1 & 6) (Red Hymnal)

"While Yet the Morn is Breaking"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance - Last Sunday (38) Average (50)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time
	-11:20 a.m.	– Quarterly Voters' Meeting
Wednesday	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Thursday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday School and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship w/Communion
	-11:15 a.m.	– Coffee/Fellowship Time

CLC News – Pastor Paul Krause is considering the call to Trinity of Watertown, SD. Gethsemane of Spokane has called Teacher Quinn Sprengeler of Lynnwood, WA. A summary and full report of the recent CLC Coordinating Council is available from the Pastor.

Quarterly Voters' Meeting – Voting members of St Paul please note the Quarterly Voters' meeting scheduled for this morning. It is not expected to be long meeting, and God-given wisdom of all of our voters makes for a much more productive and profitable meeting.

Nepal Aid – Contrary to early reports, we now know that at least 8 CLC affiliate members lost their lives in the recent Nepal earthquakes, along with significant destruction to churches and homes. Please see the bulletin insert on what is being done by the CLC Board of Missions as well as how you can help.

Congregational Meeting – The Church Council, through President Mike McEnroe, would like to hold an informal informational meeting with the congregation immediately after the service this morning. We are anticipating the meeting to last only a few minutes. Please make a point of attending.