

St. Peter Evangelical Lutheran Church + Modesto, California
The Fifth Sunday of Easter
May 18, 2003

Sermon by Pastor Jonathan Micheel

John 15:1-8

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. (NIV)

We Are the Branches

Today we're going to use our imaginations. Can you do that? I know the kids here can; kids are great at imagining things. Can you grown-ups do it, too?

Driving and riding around you've seen vineyards, right? Many of you have seen them up close; you've planted or tended grapevines. I'd like us all to picture a vineyard right now. Can you see it? Blue sky above. Row after row of grapevines. Bright green leaves. Now zoom in on one vine. See it growing out of the ground? It's planted in rich soil and growing upward. Now zoom in more. Look at one of the smaller branches. It's connected to the main vine, growing out of it. It has leaves growing out of it, and even some grapes. Do you see it? Do you see the branch? That's you! Look next to you. Do you see another similar branch? That's me. Other branches—do you see them? Some with leaves a little different color. Some with more grapes than you, some with less. Those are people, other Christians. And who is the vine out of whom we're all growing? It is Jesus.

Attached to the true vine

How did we get here? Well, we know that it didn't happen by itself. When have you ever seen a cluster of grapes just appear out of nowhere? Have you ever gone out into your backyard and seen a little branch from a grapevine complete with grapes just sitting there? It doesn't happen. No, someone had to plant us. A gardener had to plant a grapevine, a real, living vine. Then we grew out of the vine. It was planted. It grew. And its life gave us life, the little branches.

That's how we came to be alive, isn't it? Spiritually alive, I mean. We didn't make it happen ourselves. We didn't decide one day to make ourselves alive. It wasn't as if one day we wiggled our way up to a grapevine and attached ourselves. No, first came the vine. The gardener planted it. Then the branches grew. First came the vine, then came the branches. The vine lives, and because he lives, we live.

But let's say that one day you and I—we're the branches, remember—get tired of being attached to the vine. I say, "This stinks. I'm always connected to this vine. I want to be on my

own.” “Me, too,” you reply. “Let’s do it,” we agree. “Let’s get away from this vine and live on our own.”

How do you think we’ll fare? How will we do on our own, apart from the vine? Let’s let the vine, Jesus, weigh in on this: 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. Do you hear what Jesus is claiming? It is audacious! Jesus is saying that there is no spiritual life apart from him. None. Apart from him is only death. In him is vibrant life.

God, our Father, planted the vine. He sent his Son, Jesus, into the world. Jesus took away the things that made us dead to God. He took away our sins. He did this by suffering and dying for them in our place. Then he rose from the dead. Now he lives, the true Vine.

Apart from Jesus, is there any other way to be close to God? No, says Jesus, there is not. We are sinful people. And God can’t tolerate sin. To be close to God, to receive his blessing of eternal fellowship with him, we need those sins taken away. And we simply cannot do that. That’s why we need Jesus. He, God in the flesh, took away our guilt and made us righteous in the sight of God. Who else can do that? No one. And no other religion in the world can, either.

Thank God, the gardener, for what he’s done! The Father has found us. His Spirit has come to us and connected us to Jesus. He did that to us through his Word and through baptism. Because of what our Father, the gardener, has done, we are branches. Jesus is the Vine. He lives, and by faith in him we live, too.

Pruned in love by the gardener

One warm, bright day you and I, branches connected to the vine, see the gardener coming. It’s really him! He’s coming to us, to give us personal attention. What an honor! Maybe he’s going to look us over, admiring us. Maybe he’s going to tell all the other branches, “See these two? This is what I want all of you to be.”

But wait. What is the gardener holding? It’s shiny; it glistens in the sun. I think it’s... it’s a knife! And he’s going to use it on me! And after he’s done with me, he’s coming after you! He’s going to cut us. What in the world is he doing? “Stop!” we shout out. “Get that knife away from us!”

The gardener looks at us. “Calm down,” he says. “What I’m about to do will hurt, but I’m doing it because I love you.” And before we can protest any more, the gardener cuts little pieces off of us. It hurts, but we realize that what he has cut off are pieces that were draining our strength. They were little shoots coming out of us that were never going to bear any fruit. They were pieces of growth that were taking our energy. It hurt to lose them, but slowly we begin to realize that we are far better off without them. We have been pruned.

It does hurt, doesn’t it, when God cuts us? When he comes to us and tells us that certain things in our lives must go? I’m talking about sins. God tells us his law, his demands of us, and we realize that there are many things in our lives that hurt us spiritually—things that can kill us eternally. Like little, unproductive suckers growing on a vine, those sins take our spiritual energy and produce nothing good. So God comes in his Word and condemns those sins. He leads us to turn away from them, to repent. Repentance hurts. It’s no fun to confront our own sins, all that we’ve done wrong, all the good we have failed to do. God forces us to admit that we are sinful, both by nature and by the things we do and fail to do. He makes us see that we deserve his punishment both now and in eternity. He even lets us feel a lot of pain sometimes by letting us suffer consequences of our sins. But he doesn’t do this just to see us squirm. No, he cuts the sins out of our lives because he loves us. Our sins lead us away from him. They threaten to kill the life that he has given us through Jesus, the vine.

God’s goal in pruning us is to make our connection to the vine even stronger. With his Word he cuts, but with his Word he also heals. He proclaims to us his love in Christ Jesus.

With that proclamation, God strengthens our connection to Jesus. He cleans us of our guilt and everything that goes with it. He makes us more firmly attached to the vine, our life. He takes away the things that harm us. The result is that we now are able to devote our energy to doing what branches were created to do.

Bearing much fruit

Something happens to us branches every so often. We do what branches on a vine do. We produce fruit. Grapes just begin to grow. Life is flowing from the vine to us, and we naturally produce fruit. It's what branches do.

Jesus tells us that when we are connected to him, we will bear fruit. Fruit will naturally come forth from us. He tells us what that fruit is: This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples. When we show that we are disciples of Jesus—that's the fruit that Christ's love produces in us.

I love how Jesus says this: I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit... "He will bear much fruit." It will just happen. In a vineyard, the gardener (or farmer or vintner or vinedresser—I'm probably not using the right jargon) doesn't have to go out to the branches and tell them: "Hey you! Make some grapes!" No, they just do it. Bearing fruit is what branches do.

That's what Christians do. They just naturally show that they are disciples of Jesus. The apostle John, who was present when Jesus spoke these words about the vine and the branches, puts it this way: And this is his command: to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and to love one another as he commanded us. To be a disciple of Jesus means, first of all, to believe in him. It means to trust him, to believe and to know that he is the one in whom there is real life. It means to be loved by Jesus Christ, and to live in that love. It means to reflect the love he gives us, to reflect it to the people around us. This is the fruit that we branches produce: we believe in Jesus and love each other.

Producing fruit—that's what Christians do. We know and believe that Jesus Christ loves us. We know that he gave his life for us on the cross. We know that in him we are innocent in the sight of God. We know that Jesus is alive and giving us spiritual life every single day. We are branches in the vine. And so we are naturally going to show it. We love God, who loves us. We show our commitment to him as his Son showed his commitment to us by going to the cross. We will live for him, showing that he is important to us, for he has shown that we are important to him. This life of Jesus that is in us will naturally produce fruit: lives that honor God.

And we love one another. Not just by saying, "Sure, I love you. Yeah, I care, I guess." We love not just with words, but also with actions. After all, isn't that how God loves us? God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son. (John 3:16) God loved, and God gave. He loved with action.

To love with action—how you will do this you'll have to think about. Start in your own home. Start with the people closest to you. Care for them, not in words only, but with action. Then broaden your love to include all your family members (even the unlovable ones), and the people here at church, and the people at school, and the people at work, and everyone you encounter who is in need. Jesus loves you. Love one another. The gardener will be honored.

When you fail—and we all do many times each day—don't despair. The gardener will be there to prune you, remember? God will cut away your sin, leaving you clean and healthy and ready to bear fruit again.

Here's a Bible quiz question for you (I think you'll be able to figure this one out): On what night did Jesus speak these words about the vine and the branches? It was the night he was betrayed. The night he first fed his disciples with the special, sacred meal of his body and blood, the Lord's Supper. Nourished by that close contact with him, Jesus told his disciples to

bear fruit. Look at the prayer that we will pray after receiving the Lord's Supper today: "We give thanks, almighty God, that you have refreshed us with this holy supper. We pray that through it you will strengthen our faith in you and increase our love for one another." We say to God, "You have attached us to the true vine. We are the branches, alive in him. You have strengthened our attachment in the Lord's Supper. Now let us bear fruit. Let us honor you, God, and love the people around us."

I asked you to use your imaginations today. But really, this is not imaginary at all. We are the branches. Jesus is the vine. The life we have in him is real, not imaginary. And the love he shows us is real, too. So is the love we show one another.

He is the vine; we are the branches. Amen.