

Sermon for April 28, 2024 – Easter 5

John 15:1-8 EHV

Theme: Remain in Christ

*“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. <sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off. And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit. <sup>3</sup>“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. <sup>4</sup>Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you. A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me. <sup>5</sup>“I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. <sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned. <sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. <sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.*

Plants are amazing. One summer, I attempted to grow scorpion peppers. Unfortunately, a storm caused the plant stalk to snap in half. I did my best to reconnect the disconnected stalk as soon as possible. The result? The reconnected stalk stayed alive.

In today’s sermon text, Jesus impresses upon us the importance of remaining in Him. Apart from Christ, we are spiritually dead - facing everlasting destruction. Connected to him, we live – producing beautiful, everlasting fruits that glorify our heavenly Father. Let us consider these truths under the theme: **Remain in Christ.**

Before jumping into our sermon text, I want to tell you about an elderly German gentleman I knew as a child in Wetaskiwin: Mr. Wiechmann. He grew tomatoes at our parsonage. I will never forget the tender care he showed each plant, ensuring they were supported, well-watered, cleaned, and pruned. He treated his tomato plants as if they were his children. Did they ever produce sumptuous tomatoes!

Jesus says: *“I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener.* When reading this section of Scripture, I cannot help but think of Mr. Wiechmann because the tender care he showed his tomato plants illustrates God's care for us in Christ. God the Father has nothing but love for His Son - desiring His Son’s kingdom to be gloriously fruitful. That is why he lovingly tends to it, just as a gardener tends to his plants.

Jesus continues, *<sup>2</sup>Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he is going to cut off.*

Have you ever seen dead branches on a tree in the summer? Their greyness distracts from the green glory of the tree. Worse yet, internal rot could infect other branches, causing them to die, too. That is why a good gardener carefully removes dead branches from a beloved plant so it remains healthy and alive.

The same is true regarding Christ's kingdom. God the Father will remove from it all who are spiritually dead – that is to say, who show no signs of repentance and faith in Jesus. Why? Out of love for Jesus and his kingdom. He knows how the rot of sin and unbelief spreads to others if left unchecked. Love, therefore, compels him to remove every “dead branch” from Christ's kingdom.

*And he prunes every branch that does bear fruit, so that it will bear more fruit.*

The word for “prune” here is literally “clean.” Just as Mr. Wiechmann tended to each branch of his tomato plants (examining, pruning, and cleaning them to be more fruitful), God the Father cares for you. He uses his Law to expose all the spiritual parasites that eat away your faith. He uses the trials you face to prune you so that your reliance on Christ grows all the stronger. He lovingly tends to you with his Gospel to heal the wounds his Law inflicted to make you more beautiful and fruitful in Christ.

Jesus continues: <sup>3</sup>*“You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you.* Note this, dear Christian: because of what Jesus did for you on the cross, you are clean of all sin! Through faith in Jesus, you are spiritually alive. The Gospel has made you a beautiful, beloved branch before the Father because you are one with His Son and bring him glory. God, therefore, tends to you – working in all things for your everlasting good.

Understand that this is who you are in Jesus and then take to heart His words: <sup>4</sup>*Remain in me, and I am going to remain in you.*

It is only natural for a branch to remain in a vine. Why? Because it can only grow from the vine. And just as branches share an intimate union with the vine, you share an intimate union with Christ through faith in Him. Jesus is your life and strength. He is so much a part of you that, just as a branch and stalk are one, you are one with him. Oh, what hope this verse offers: Jesus always remains with you as you remain in Him. He is present to strengthen, revive, and support you through everything. He works in and through you – all to the glory of His name!

But here is another truth you need to keep in mind: even though there is no reason for you ever to want to separate yourself from Jesus; nevertheless, the devil, the world, and your sinful nature try to drive a wedge between you and him. How? The world distracts you with many worries and false promises – insinuating that you have the power to make your life better on your own. And the devil? Well, just as he tempted Eve with discontentment — moving our first parents to rebel against God - so he tempts all of us.

Therefore, Jesus reminds us: *A branch cannot bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Likewise, you cannot bear fruit unless you remain in me.*

But this invites the question: how do we remain in Christ? The answer: by staying in His Word. Yes, the Gospel in Word and Sacrament is the spiritual sap that keeps us alive. As you receive the Gospel in faith, God's powerful Word works in you - accomplishing everything He desires. The Gospel changes you. Instead of looking like a bare branch at the end of winter, the Gospel gives you life – causing you to bud, flourish, and be fruitful.

And what, exactly, is the fruit you produce? Well, think of it this way: if an apple tree produces apples, and a grapevine produces grapes, the fruit of a Christian will be Christ!

When people look at a Christian, God wants them to see Jesus: that is to say, his selfless love, his compassion for the hurting, his patience in adversity, his forgiveness of all sin, his hope in the Father, and his love for his enemies. Yes, the fruit God desires Christians to produce is a Christlike attitude that reveals itself in God-pleasing works - all to the glory of His Son!

“But,” you might think, “I am not like that. I find it hard to control my temper. I am not as kind as I ought to be. I can’t be like Christ: it’s impossible!” And you are correct in thinking these things because no one but Christ can produce a Christlike attitude alone. For that reason, Jesus says:

*<sup>5</sup>“I am the Vine; you are the branches. The one who remains in me and I in him is the one who bears much fruit, because without me you can do nothing.*

Only Christ can produce the perfect fruit God the Father desires because only He is perfectly righteous. But that’s why Jesus came: to live a perfect life of obedience to God’s Law in your place. He died for your sins on the cross, rising again to show that all sin has been forgiven. Jesus did this so that, through faith in Him, His righteousness would become your righteousness. And just as a vine’s sap flowing through the branch produces fruit, Jesus imputes his righteousness to you through faith so that every good work you do is perfect and holy in God’s sight. Why? Because God doesn’t see your imperfection but Jesus’ perfection. And in the peace of His forgiveness, Christ moves you to bring forth the fruits of love toward God and your neighbour that delight your heavenly Father.

Jesus says: *<sup>6</sup>If anyone does not remain in me, he is thrown away like a branch and withers. Such branches are gathered, thrown into the fire, and burned.*

Without faith, it is impossible to please God.<sup>i</sup> Why? Because any good work that a person does outside of faith in Christ is not a fruit of Christ. Only faith in the Gospel keeps us connected to Christ so that He might produce fruitful living in us. If our connection with Christ is severed (if we stop using and believing the Gospel that connects us to Christ), we will wither. And, unless God mercifully regrafts us into Christ,<sup>ii</sup> we will die spiritually – ending up in the everlasting fires that God created for the devil and his angels.

But Jesus says: *<sup>7</sup>If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

There you have it: Only the Gospel (Christ’s Word) keeps us spiritually alive. Jesus does not want us severed from him. Therefore, as we stay connected to him through faith in the Gospel, He gives us this promise: *“Ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.”*

“Does this mean I could ask for loads of money and a new Ferrari, and God has to give it to me?” No, it does not mean that at all. Look carefully at the text again. Jesus says: *If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you.*

It is impossible for a person as intimately connected to Christ as a branch is to the vine to ask for sinful or selfish things. How so? Because Christ lives in him. His love compels our new man to desire only the things that glorify God – even when our sinful nature desires the opposite. And, because of our connection to Christ, our new man is who we are. Yes, because of our connection to Christ, we constantly pray: “*Not my will, but yours be done.*”<sup>iii</sup> How so? Whether we realize it or not, our greatest desire as Christians is that God’s good and gracious will is done. Therefore, everything for which we pray is subject to God’s will, through which he only desires what is in our best interest.

*<sup>8</sup>My Father is glorified by this: that you continue to bear much fruit and prove to be my disciples.*

Brothers and sisters in Christ, just as a good gardener takes pleasure in every fruitful branch on his favourite vine, the Father also takes pleasure in you. He carefully tends to you with his Law and Gospel – cleaning and strengthening your connection to Christ so that you might fulfill the glorious purpose for which he created and saved you: reflecting Christ to the world!

Rejoice in your connection with Christ. Treasure the Gospel by meditating on it daily. Avoid the things that try to separate you from Jesus. Pray as boldly as Jesus prayed during his earthly ministry, trusting His promise to grant what you ask. Understand that when the Father allows painful times in your life, He is pruning you so that your reliance on His Son might grow ever stronger. Yes, as a healthy branch remains in a vine, so remain in Christ. Then you will always be a living, fruitful member of His kingdom, in whom the Father takes great delight. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Cf. Hebrews 11:6

<sup>ii</sup> Cf. Romans 11:16-24)

<sup>iii</sup> Luke 22:42 EHV